youth futures FOUNDATION

Pilot Evaluation Report

Evaluation of the Durham Works Futures programme

Jack Lawton-Summers, Irene Soriano Redondo, Gabrielle McGannon, Domenica Avila, Constance Woollen, Megan Liskey, Parnika Purwar, Johnny Runge, Susannah Hume (King's College London)

Jack Booth, Gavan Conlon, Calum Kennedy (London Economics)

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- Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with a £90m endowment from the Reclaim Fund to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Our aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for changeBlurb about the project – e.g. aims, any partner funders
- Youth Futures contact details for more info about the report:
    - Dr Amanda Mackey
    - Youth Futures Foundation, Fivefields, 8-10 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0DH
    - comms@youthfuturesfoundation.org
- Logos of those involved:

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Glossary

AP	Alternative Provision
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
DCC	Durham County Council
DWF	DurhamWorks Futures
EARS	Early Adolescent Resilience Scale
EC	Employment Coach
EET	Education, employment or training
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IAG	Information, Advice or Guidance
ILM	Intermediate Labour Market
LEO	Longitudinal Education Outcomes
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
QED	Quasi-Experimental Design
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
RDD	Regression Discontinuity Design
RSES	Rosenberg Self-esteem scale
SEN	Special Educational Needs
ToC	Theory of Change
YFF	Youth Futures Foundation

Executive summary

The project

This is the final report of the pilot evaluation of the DurhamWorks Futures (DWF) programme, delivered by Durham County Council (DCC) in partnership with Groundwork. This programme was funded through a development grant from Youth Futures Foundation (YFF).

The programme works with young people aged 16-24 in County Durham, who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and who face barriers to accessing the labour market. DWF pairs participants with an Employment Coach (EC) who provides individualised support through one-to-one coaching. Some of the activities DWF offers to participants include peer mentor support, volunteering opportunities, and Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) interventions, among others.

The pilot evaluation took place between June 2022 and May 2024. It was a mixed-method evaluation, using qualitative and quantitative data, such as surveys, interviews, and digital diaries, to understand the association between the programme and the outcomes of interests, the mechanisms through which outcomes were achieved, and the programme's delivery and costs.

The evaluation of DWF was completed alongside a pilot evaluation of another youth employment support programme based in Merseyside. The original intention was to report on these concurrent pilot evaluations together and include a comparative element in the reporting. Due to the differences in the programmes' respective target cohort and the delivery models in practice, it was concluded that a comparison study would not be productive, and two separate reports were created. The corresponding report for the programme based in Merseyside can be found here. As data collection, analysis, and reporting for the two programmes were completed concurrently, the resulting reports have been considerably influenced by each other. As such, they should be viewed as companion pieces, with the evidence and insights put forward in both complementing each other.

Findings

The table overleaf summarises the findings of our evaluation.

Research question	Findings
Research question 1: What is the association between increasing levels of engagement with DurhamWorks Futures and: • uptake of employment, education or training opportunities? • retention of employment opportunities? • labour market experience? • self-esteem? • resilience? • mental wellbeing? • work-related skills?	Overall, through the dosage-response models, we find associations between higher levels of dosage of the programme (as measured by impact-weighted hours of engagement, See Appendix D "Development of the dosage indicator") and outcomes. These associations were significant for the likelihood of being recorded as EET, and for improvements in wellbeing and self-esteem. In addition, compared to a comparator group drawn from Understanding Society, participation in DWF is associated with increased likelihood of transition into education, employment or training (EET). Data collection constraints meant the analysis was unable to capture whether employment opportunities were retained. It should also be noted that these estimates are correlational and do not imply a causal effect. Findings from qualitative interviews suggest that many DWF participants achieved positive outcomes. These include perceived improvements to confidence and self-esteem, social and interpersonal skills, as well as improvements in knowledge of the job market and job searching skills. The research also demonstrated that some participants achieve EET outcomes, but it is worth noting that some participants start their journey far away from the labour market, and that it is not realistic for all participants to achieve EET outcomes, for example, in some cases the focus should be on stabilising life circumstances.
Research question 2: What are the drivers of the associations (or absence of association) observed?	The qualitative interviews show that positive outcomes are especially driven by the personalised and holistic approach of the intervention, centred on the close and trusted mentor-mentee relationship. The interviews also suggested that DWF's work in increasing participants' confidence to engage in opportunities was a driver of positive outcomes.

Research question	Findings
	External barriers include a lack of motivation, family breakdown and bereavement, bad influences from peer groups, and poor mental health. Findings from the quantitative outcomes analysis show that previous educational attainment can be a driver of positive outcomes, as it is positively associated with transitions away from NEET status and transitions into employment.
Research question 3: To what extent was the programme delivered as intended, and in what ways did implementation vary?	The programme was delivered as intended, as it provided tailored, person-centred support that matched participants' needs and preferences. Both the focus of the sessions as well as the type of communication were tailored to each participant's needs. Although participant journeys can substantially vary, the phases described in the programme's participant journey maps were consistent with the delivery.
Research question 4: To what extent does the programme develop the skills and knowledge of employment coaches, local employers and/or service providers?	Findings from qualitative interviews suggest that staff have been able to access ongoing training opportunities to gain new skills and ways of working with vulnerable young people. Interviews with employers also suggest that recruiting young people from the programme has had some positive effects on employers. However, given the small sample of employer interviews, findings should be treated with caution.
Research question 5: How does the programme develop strategic relationships with programme partners and service providers, and how does this affect young people's support journeys?	DWF adopts a proactive role in building relationships with employers to generate opportunities for their participants, such as Intermediate Labour Market or grant-funded employment opportunities. Open communication and ongoing dialogue are at the centre of their approach. A key enabler for building relationships was appointing an Employment Engagement Officer who works alongside the ECs. The external relationships with employers have a significant effect on programme participants, as they often contribute to their employment journeys starting, and progress towards suitable employment.

Research question	Findings
Research question 6: To what extent does the programme adopt a No Wrong Doors approach, and how does this affect young people's support journey?	DWF offers access to a range of services to support participants with different types and levels of need, which is in line with the No Wrong Doors approach. While the No Wrong Doors approach is not an explicit ethos of the programme, it is embedded and reflected by staff's willingness and ability to refer their participants to a range of external services and opportunities that meet a variety of different needs and help reduce barriers to employment.
Research question 7: What are the costs and benefits of the programme?	Whilst it is important to note that the results from the quantitative outcomes analysis are purely correlational and do not imply a causal effect, the programme was found to have positive associations on the probability of transitioning away from NEET status and on finding employment. Assuming that these results reflect the actual impacts of the programme, there are positive net benefits associated with DWF. That is the benefits were greater than the costs of each programme. The total net benefits were worth approximately £600,000, equivalent to a net benefit per participant of £4,400. These figures correspond to a positive benefit-cost ratio of 1.6.

1 Introduction

This report describes findings of the evaluation of DurhamWorks Futures (DWF), delivered by Durham County Council (DCC) in partnership with Groundwork, an employment support programme supporting young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

The evaluation was funded by the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) and conducted by the Policy Institute at King's College London and London Economics.

1.1 Background

Within County Durham, some NEET young people face complex barriers to engaging with the labour market. These include those who have: received Children's Social Care interventions; received Special Educational Needs (SEN) support; experienced exclusions from education; and/or attended Alternative Provision (AP).

Research shows that these young people are less likely to make a positive progression into sustained employment or training.[1] Those experiencing deprivation within these groups are at even greater risk of becoming NEET. To address this, the DWF programme aims to fill the gap in post-16 employment support provision for these young people, helping them to find and sustain employment.

County Durham is an area with relatively high deprivation – the local authority is the 65th most deprived in England out of 317 and has pockets of extreme deprivation. The county has very low population density and few urban centres.[2] This makes accessing opportunities difficult, a problem which is compounded by persistently insufficient public transport in the area.

1.2 The programme

DWF is a new offer within the DurhamWorks framework, which includes a range of employment programmes that work with NEET young people. DWF

[1] For instance, Neil Harrison, Jo Dixon, David Sanders-Ellis, Jade Ward and Poppy Asker (2023) Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England, Nuffield Foundation; Elizabeth Sanderson (2020) Youth transitions to employment longitudinal evidence from marginalised young people in England, Journal of Youth Studies, Vol 23(10); Andy Powell (2021) NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training, House of Commons Library Briefing.
[2] https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/E06000047/

retains elements of other DurhamWorks programmes run by DCC, such as one-to-one intensive mentoring and guided action planning, but focuses on NEET young people aged 16 to 24 living within County Durham with experience of Children Social Care (25% of the sample), SEN support (45% of the sample), exclusion from the educational sector (32% of the sample) and/or Alternative Provision (AP) (27% of the sample). Smaller caseloads also distinguish DWF from other DCC programmes.

Participants are paired with an Employment Coach (EC) who provides individualised support through one-to-one coaching and undertakes a bespoke action plan designed to address the participant's needs and interests. The plan can include a combination of different support, such as peer mentoring, volunteering opportunities, job tasters, industry specific employment routeways, Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) opportunities[3] and/or temporary waged job initiatives with employer incentives. If a young person gains employment, the coach may also continue to provide in-work support for up to three months.

DWF was designed as a hub-and-spoke model, in which service users are supported from a central point (their ECs) and given access to other services and opportunities via referrals.

Further details about the programme can be found in the TIDieR framework in Appendix A, and the programme's Theory of Change (ToC) and participants' journey are depicted in Figure 8.

1.3 Research questions

The research questions that have guided the evaluation are presented below.

1. What is the association between increasing levels of engagement with DurhamWorks Futures and uptake of employment, education or training opportunities; retention of employment opportunities; labour market experience; self-esteem; resilience; mental wellbeing; and work-related skills?

[3] ILMs aim to improve employability of young people by providing temporary employment opportunities of minimum of 6 months with 2 to 4 weeks of preparation prior to start of the ILM.

2. What are the drivers of the associations (or absence of association) observed?
3. To what extent was the programme delivered as intended, and in what ways did implementation vary?
    a. To what extent were the programme's interventions captured by the Theory of Change?
    b. To what extent were the programme's mechanisms of change captured by the Theory of Change?
    c. To what extent were the programme's outcomes captured by the Theory of Change?
4. To what extent does the programme develop the skills and knowledge of:
    a. Employment Coaches?
    b. Local employers?
    c. Service providers?
5. How does the programme develop strategic relationships with programme partners and service providers, and how does this affect young people's support journeys?
6. To what extent does the programme adopt a No Wrong Doors approach[4], and how does this affect young people's support journey?
7. What are the costs and benefits of the programme?

1.4 Ethics and data protection

All data was held according to King's Data Protection Policy and Procedures. All data collection adhered to ethical practice ensuring the confidentiality of information shared and the secure handling of data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and King's Data Protection Policy. The privacy statement of DWF was also amended to reflect data

[4] This approach can be summarised as follows: no matter what a participant's starting point is, or how they initially access the programme, they will be connected to the support that is right for them and is responsive to their current needs.

sharing with King's College London. Appendix B contains relevant ethics and data protection information for this study.

2 Methods

This section sets out the methods that were used to respond to the research questions identified in Section 1.3.

2.1 Participant selection

The target group for the evaluation followed the programme's inclusion and exclusion criteria. That is, NEET young people aged 16-24 with complex needs (including care experience, exclusion or AP experience, SEND, economically disadvantaged).

The evaluation is based on the management information data of 141 participants. They started the programme between June 2022 and November 2022, and exited it between August 2022 and November 2023. As shown in Table 1, this evaluation is also based on the responses from 137 baseline surveys, 249 midline surveys completed by 112 participants at different time points, and 39 endline surveys. Surveys included questions on mental wellbeing, resilience, self-esteem, work-related skills, and feedback on the programme.

A total of 16 young people were recruited to take part in qualitative interviews (see Table 1 for more details). From these 16, a total of three young people were interviewed twice (six to 12 weeks into engagement, and towards the end of their engagement in the programme). The evaluation team also conducted four observations of the sessions being delivered to further understand the dynamic and set-up of the interventions.

All participants were provided with an information sheet which gave details about the evaluation, the data that would be collected about them and how it would be used. Participants were given at least one week to consider if they would like to participate in the research before providing consent.

2.2 Theory of Change development

King's worked collaboratively with DCC and Groundwork to develop a programme-level Theory of Change (ToC) during the mobilisation stage of the pilot evaluation. The final ToC, which was reviewed after data collection activities were completed, is depicted and explained in Sections 3.2.1.

2.3 Data collection and analysis approach

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to address the research questions. Table 1 below provides an overview of the quantitative and qualitative methods used and the questions they aimed to answer. More details about the data collection activities, as well as the qualitative and quantitative analysis approach, can be found in Appendix D.

In particular, Section 3.4.1.2 describes our approach to developing a dosage-response model, in which we develop a dosage indicator to assess the association between engagement with the programme and outcomes.[5] Throughout this report that is referred to as the dosage-response analysis. However, it should be noted that this analysis is not causal but only correlational.

2.4 Quantitative outcomes analysis and economic evaluation

The study also provides a "quantitative outcomes analysis" alongside the dosage response analysis. The "quantitative outcomes analysis" applies econometric models to a treatment group of participants in the programme alongside a comparator group of comparable young people from the Understanding Society longitudinal dataset, to provide estimates of the impacts of DWF on key outcomes[6]. This was designed primarily to answer RQ7 on the costs and benefits of the programme. The analysis of the benefits of the programme mainly considered the benefits to individuals and wider society resulting from an increased number of individuals in employment or education. To identify these potential impacts, an econometric approach was used to estimate the change in the number of young people entering employment and education that is associated with the programme.

Similar to the "dosage-response analysis", it is important to note that the econometric methods used cannot show correlations between the programme and employment and education outcomes. The quantitative outcomes analysis estimates instead show correlations between employment

[5] The dosage-response model helps us assess the association between increasing dosage (engagement with the programme) and outcomes. The dosage indicator represents a measure of impact-weighted hours of engagement.

[6] This analysis was able to control for the following factors: sex, highest qualification level attained, length of time NEET, disability status, and benefits status.

and education outcomes and involvement in the programme, as well as for a range of control variables.

Next, we calculated the monetary value to the individual and society associated with moves into education or employment. These values were then combined with the estimates from the quantitative outcomes analysis, in order to understand the aggregate benefit associated with the programme. This was then compared to the costs of the programme to generate the net benefit and benefit-cost ratio associated with it. Further details on the methodology of the cost-benefit analysis can be found in Appendix E.

Table 1: Data collection methods

Data collection method		Approach	Research question	Number
Quantitative method	Repeated survey for participants	Baseline survey at the time of programme enrolment, repeated every three months and at exit. A final survey was conducted after 3 months of finishing engagement.	1, 2	137 baseline, 249 midline (several per participant) and 39 endline surveys
	Feedback survey	At two timepoints (midway through programme delivery and three months post-programme), we conducted a short feedback survey to assess participants' experience, perception and relations with their EC.	1, 2	27 midline and 39 endline surveys
	Cost analysis survey	ECs were asked to complete a short survey every three months providing an estimate of the time spent working.	7	302 entries
	Management information data	During the study, the programme collected a range of management data that was used during the evaluation. This was collected through the registration and referral forms.	1, 2, 7	141 records
Qualitative method	Longitudinal interviews	Interviews with participants were held six to 12 weeks into engagement, and towards the end of their engagement.	1, 2, 3, 6	16 young people interviewed, and 3 of them interviewed twice
	Interviews with frontline staff	We conducted semi-structured interviews with frontline staff including peer mentors and ECs.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	6 interviews
	Multi-media diaries	We invited young people to participate in a digital diary exercise at six points between October 2022 and August 2023.	3	7 participants
	Observations	We conducted observations at four time points over the delivery of the programme.	3	4 observations
	Staff workshops	We held workshops with up to eight staff members in each session at three time points across the evaluation.	1, 2, 3, 5	3 workshops
	Interviews with strategic staff	We conducted semi-structured interviews with Programme Managers and Project Leads.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	3 interviews
	Employer interviews	Towards the end of programme delivery, key DWF employment partners were interviewed.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	2 interviews

3 Findings

This chapter provides the key findings of the pilot evaluation, bringing together all strands of the research. This section is broken down into the following sub-sections:

- Participants: this section provides a description of the participants involved in the study.
- Programme theory: this section discusses the programme's ToC and participants' journey.
- Operation of the model in practice: this section explores whether the programme was delivered as intended.
- Evidence of promise: this section explores whether the programme led to any perceived impacts among participants, especially on young people, as well as on mentors, employers and service providers.

It is worth noting that the available information management data used in this section had limitations that required us to make a number of assumptions in preparing it for analysis. These limitations include missing data, inconsistency of recording activities, and sample attrition.

3.1 Participants

This section presents a detailed summary of the demographic profile of the participants in the DWF programme, based on management information data from 141 participants collected by the delivery team and shared with the evaluation team for analysis. It also draws on qualitative data gathered through interviews with young people, ECs, and digital diary entries.

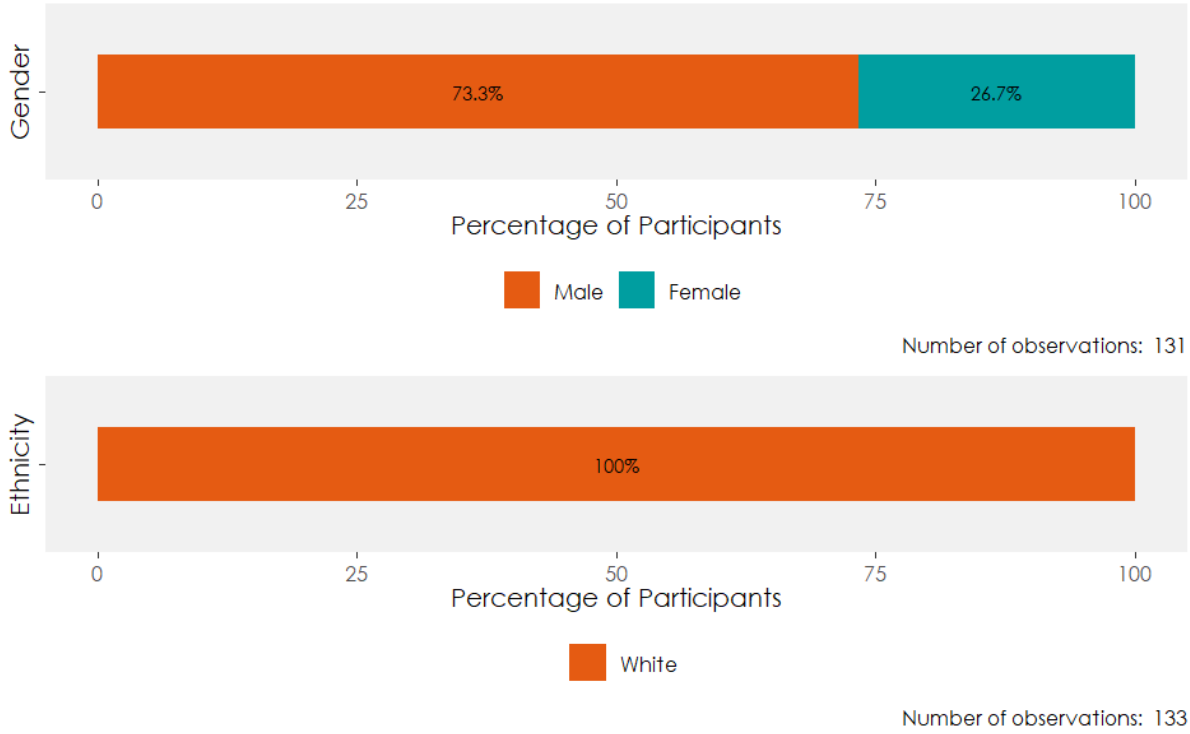
DWF works with NEET young people with additional needs who could benefit from support that is not available from existing post-16 provision from the local authority. They work with young people with experience of Children's Social Care, SEN support, exclusion from education and/or AP. The age of the participants in the sample ranges from 16 to 24 years old, as intended, though one participant was 25. Participants were, on average, 19 years old at the time they started the programme.

As shown in Figure 1 below, the gender distribution of the sample is unevenly balanced, as there is a larger proportion of young people who identify as

male (73%) than female (27%). This figure was confirmed by strategic staff, who reported that the majority of the cohort is male, reflecting a similar pattern in AP attendance and school exclusion figures in their local area. Our sample also contains a small share of non-binary young people but this has not been shown in the graph to preserve anonymity.

All young people participating in DWF self-identified as White. This might be due to the greater concentration of white people in the Durham region and thus given a small sample size, only people from one category have been captured in this analysis. While data received through the surveys presents a more granular description of ethnicity, these have been aggregated to avoid disclosing small numbers that could risk participants' anonymity.

Figure 1: DWF participants' gender and ethnicity

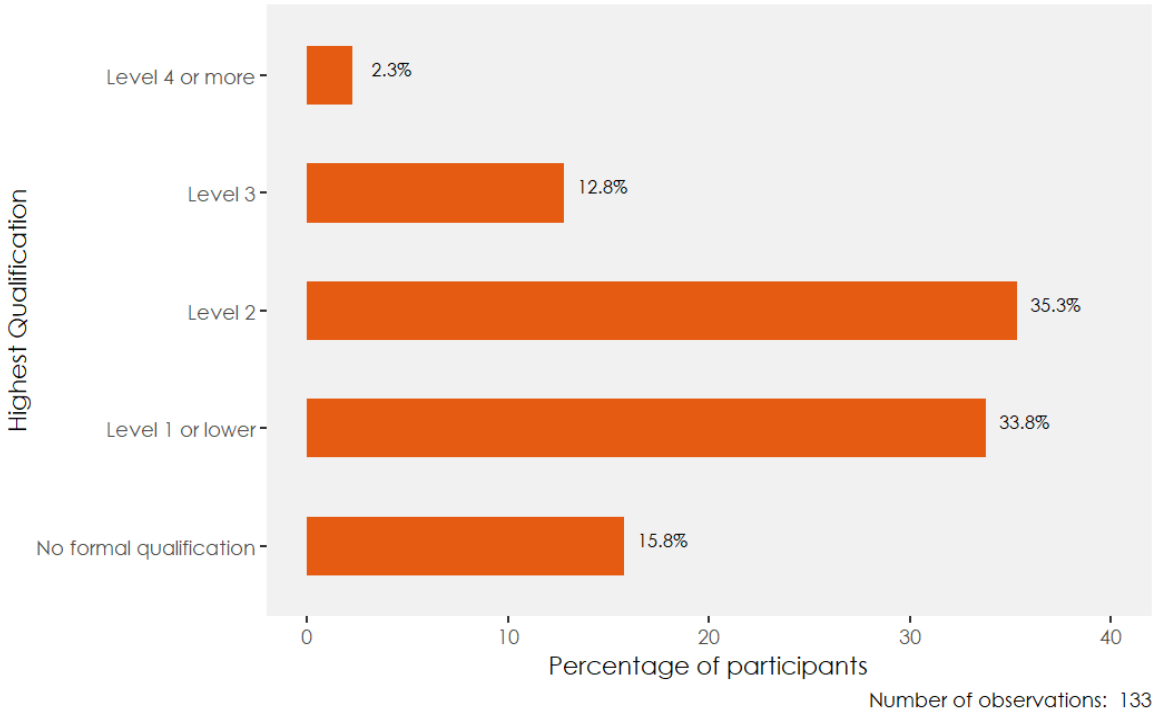


Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

Figure 2 shows the proportion of participants with different qualification levels. Most young people in the sample hold a Level 2 qualification or higher (50.4%), with Level 2 being the most common. Almost 16% of participants in the sample do not have any formal qualifications, which is higher than the rate for England and Wales as a whole for that age group (11% as reported in

the Census 2021)[7]. According to interviews, some participants had qualifications and attended college, yet others had dropped out due to adverse experiences.

Figure 2: DWF participants' qualification level



Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

Management information data shows that 52% of young people in the sample had never been employed in the past (Figure 3**Error! Reference source not found.**). This aligns with insights from interviews with participants and ECs, who explained that participants often faced severe barriers to employment.

Table 2 below shows the months that DWF participants had been out of work before joining the programme. Only 5% of evaluation participants had been in work for over 6 months in their entire life. Moreover, a considerable share of the sample (59.4%) had been out of work for more than 12 months.

Table 2: DWF participants' time out of work

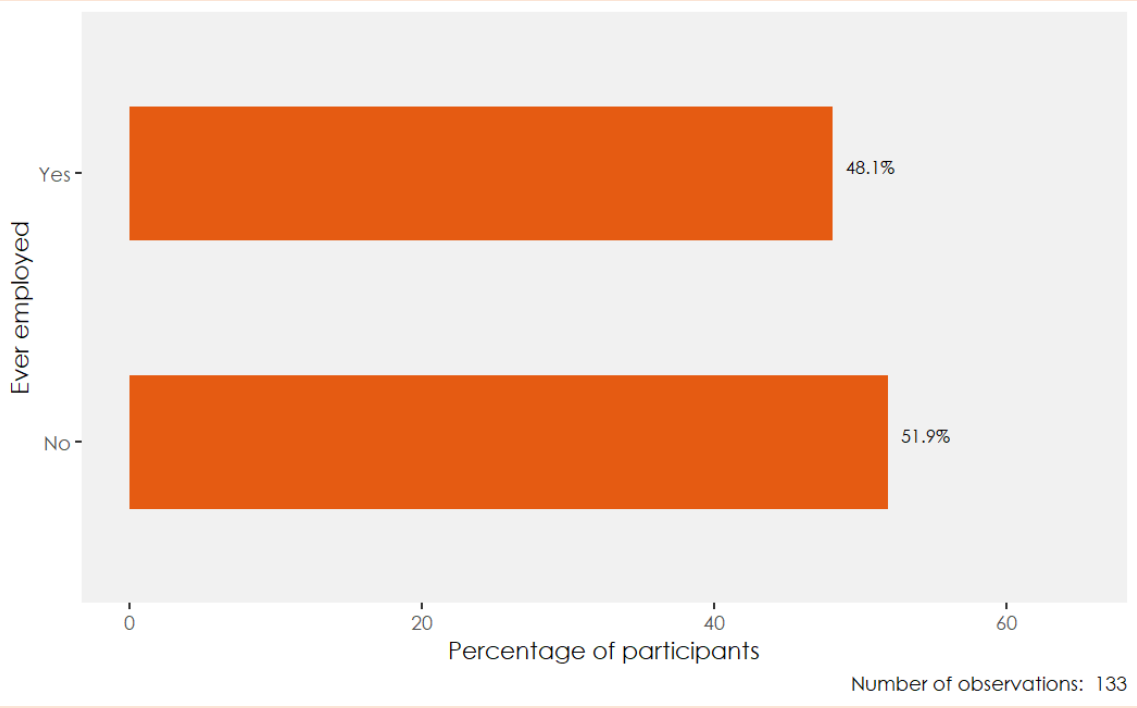
Time out of work	Percentage (%)

[7] UK Census 2021, Age and highest level of qualification, Office for National Statistics. https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/create/filter-outputs/84e9a3a5-c97f-4f00-bee2-c21531bb41e5#get-data

Less than 3 months	20.3
3-5 months	12.8
6-12 months	7.5
13 + months	59.4

Includes 133 participants, with 13+ months category including those who have never been employed

Figure 3: Percentage of DWF participants' employed before joining the programme

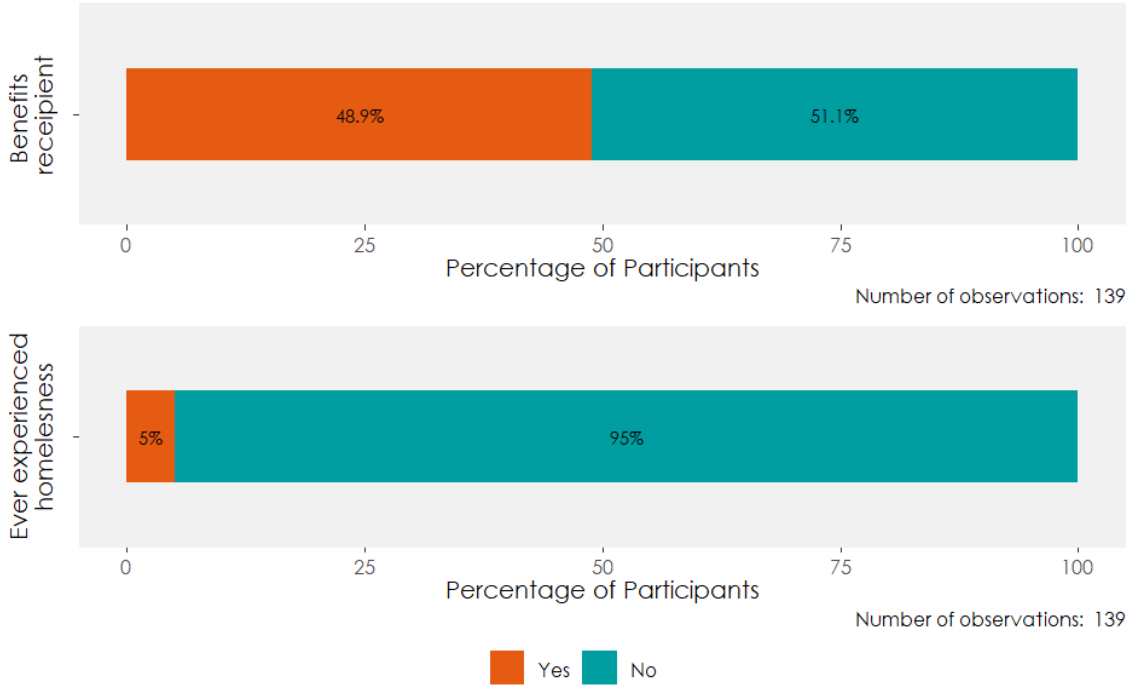


Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

The data collected by DCC also allowed us to explore participants' benefits and housing situations.

Error! Reference source not found. presents this information. Overall, 48.9% of the cohort is currently receiving benefits such as Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, and Incapacity Benefit or Employment and Support Allowance.

Figure 4: Benefits claimed and experiences of homelessness among DWF participants



Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

The management information data also shows participants' housing situation. 12.1% of the population lives in houses provided by local authority or housing association, 2.3% of the participants are currently homeless while 5.0% have experienced homelessness previously (Table 3).

Table 3: Housing situation of DWF participants

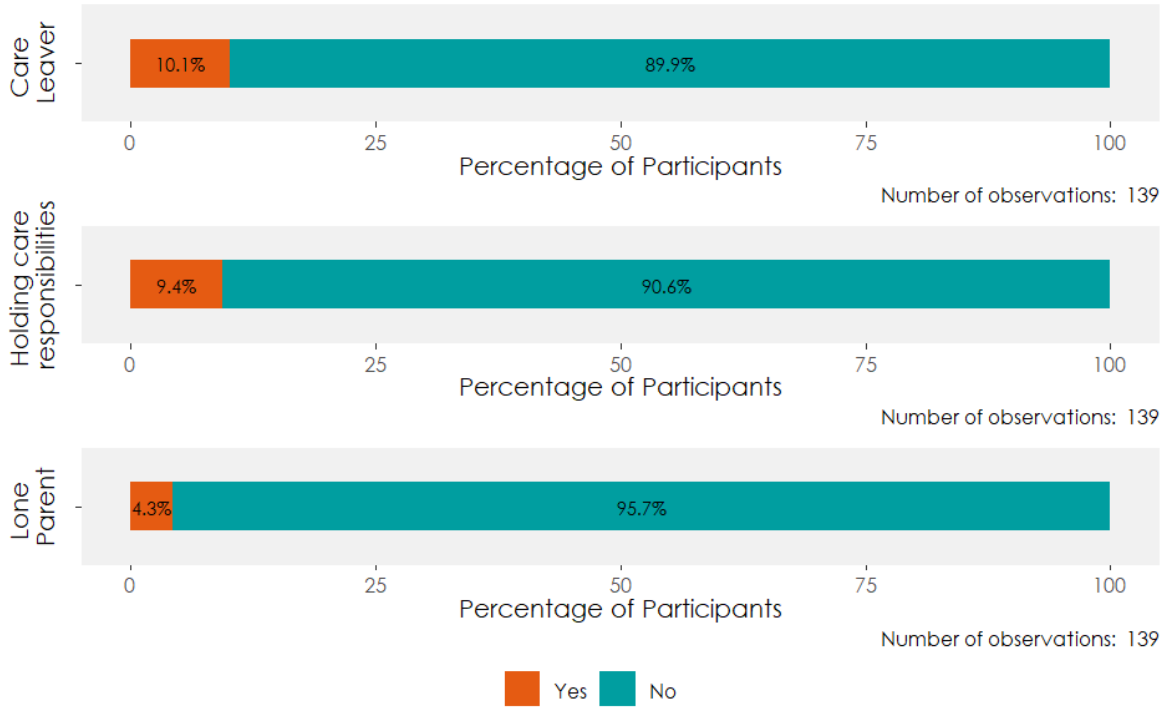
Housing situation	Share of participants (%)
Living rent-free	75.0
Renting from housing association/LA	12.1
Renting from acquaintance	3.0
Staying in a hostel or shared temporary accommodation	3.0
Renting from private landlord	2.3
Own a house	2.3
Homeless	2.3

Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

The findings show that there was a low share of participants experiencing homelessness when they joined the programme. The largest share of the cohort lives in accommodation that is rent free. This could include living with parents or carers, friends or relatives. While this is likely reflective of the age of this group, and is potentially pointing towards more stable housing. This number can also include unstable housing options such as 'sofa surfing' or facing risk of homelessness.

Overall, the share of young people with previous experiences of care in the evaluation is low (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Similarly, a small proportion holds caring responsibilities or are lone parents.

Figure 5: DWF participants' care experience and care responsibilities

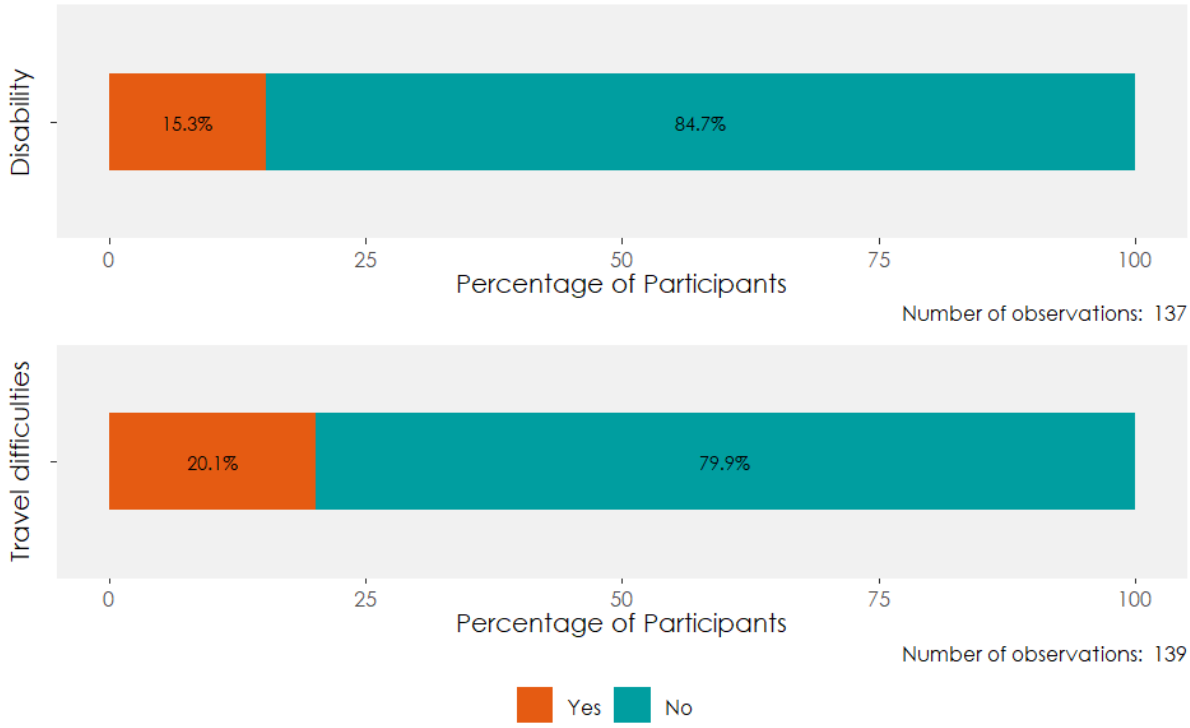


Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

Another dimension of vulnerability was examined by exploring disability and mobility difficulties. Programmes supporting young people in their journey towards employment should take these factors into account. Acknowledging the barriers that the labour market presents for young people under those circumstances is key to evaluating the success of work support interventions. **Error! Reference source not found.** Figure 6 presents the rates of disability and travel difficulties of the cohort in the evaluation.

From the cohort participating in DWF, 15.3% of the sample discloses having a disability, while one in five (20.1%) report facing mobility issues, further constraining opportunities to study and/or work.

Figure 6: Share of DWF participants disclosing a disability and experiencing travel difficulties



Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

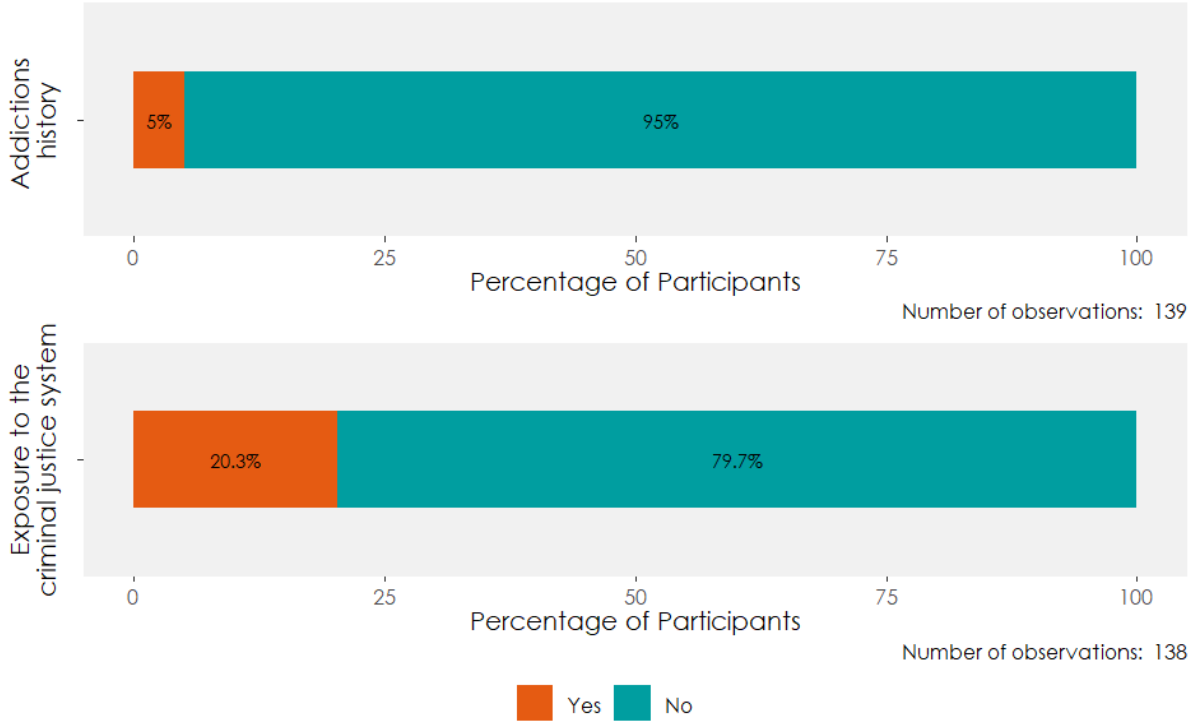
DCC's management information data also collected information on addictions history and exposure to the criminal justice system. The results are summarised in Figure 7.

One in 20 of the participants (5%) reported substance use of some type. It should be noted that this self-reported variable tends to be an under representative of the real extent of addictions. 20.3% of participants reported having previous interactions with the criminal justice system (Figure 7). Overall, in the UK, 5% of young people aged 10-17 have been cautioned and sentenced for an offence.[8] Although the statistic is not directly comparable since the young children in our sample are aged between 16-25, the share of participants who had contact with the criminal justice system is considerably

8 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65b391a60c75e30012d800fa/Youth_Justice_Statistics_2022-23.pdf

higher than the national average, and hence this is a factor to take into account when designing support for the cohort that DCC is serving.

Figure 7: DWF participants' addictions history and exposure to the criminal justice system



Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

3.2 Programme theory

This section provides a detailed description of DWF's ToC as well as a participant journey map. These were originally developed during the mobilisation stage of the evaluation.

3.2.1 Theory of Change

The delivery of the DWF programme was accurately reflected in the ToC and participant journey map. Based on the findings from the qualitative research, no modifications were needed. Figure 8 below shows the initial and final ToC for the programme in full. This sets out the interventions that the programme offers, the outcomes the intervention aims to achieve; and the mechanisms staff believe lead to these outcomes.

3.2.1.1 Target group

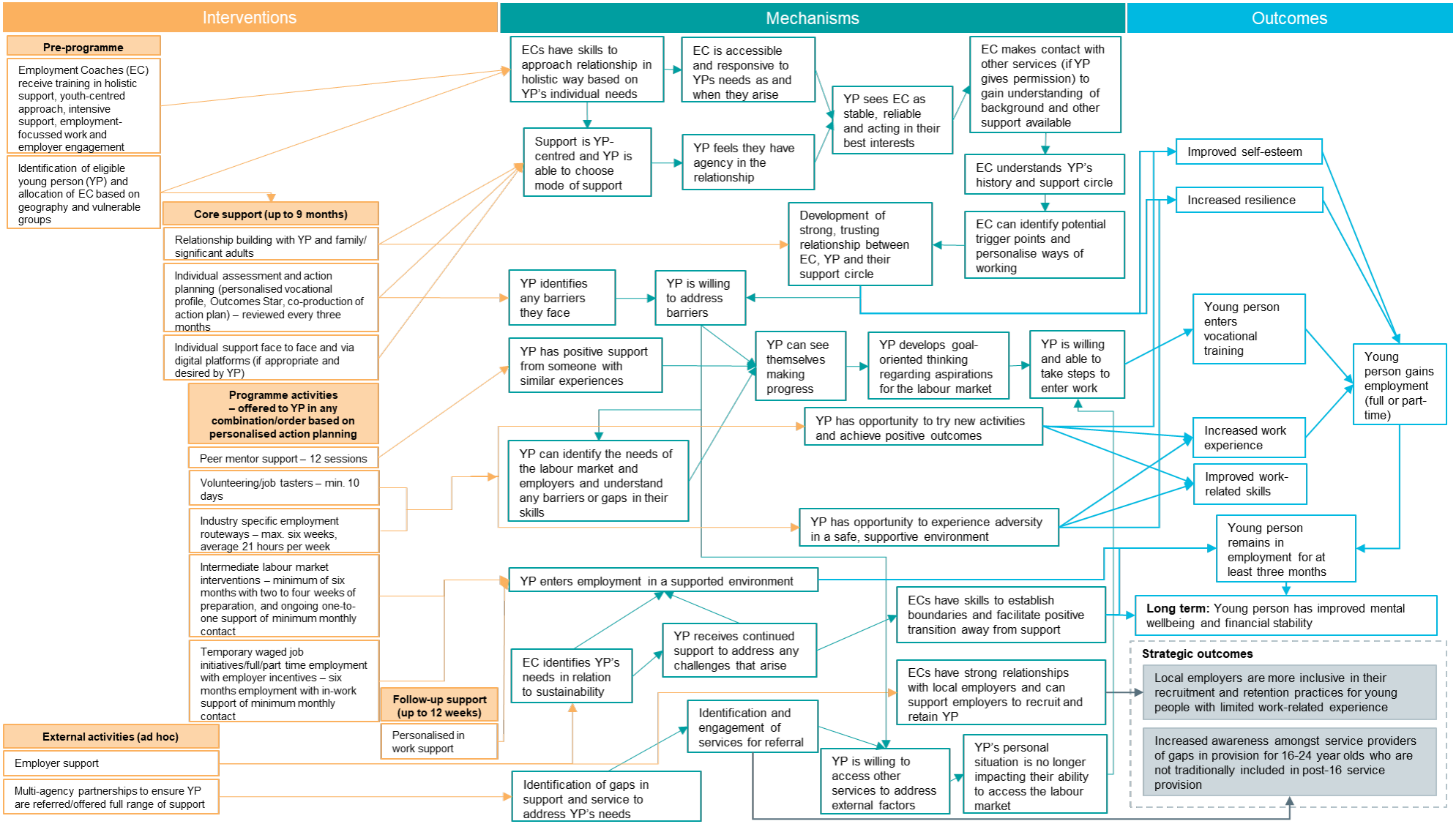
DWF works with NEET young people aged 16 to 24 who have had experience of Children's Social Care, SEN support, exclusion from education and/or AP.

3.2.1.2 Interventions/activities

When joining the programme, ECs receive training in providing holistic support and the person-centred approach, among other types of training, to ensure they are adequately prepared for supporting young people.

After a referral has been received and eligibility confirmed, participants are allocated an EC based on geography and their specific needs. Core support with the EC can then start, which usually lasts nine months, ECs focus on building a relationship with the participant and their family or significant adults. Collaboratively, the EC and the young person produce a bespoke, individual assessment and Action Plan, which is reviewed every three months. At the same time, ECs offer one-to-one support, either face-to-face, over the phone or online, depending on participants' preferences.

Figure 8: DurhamWorks Futures: Theory of Change



Depending on the needs of the young person, and following the Action Plan, ECs can offer a combination of the following activities:

- Peer mentor support (12 sessions)
- Volunteering and job tasters (minimum of 10 days)
- Industry specific employment, routeways (maximum of 6 weeks)
- ILM interventions (maximum of 6 months, with two to four weeks of preparation and ongoing one-to-one support of minimum monthly contact)
- Temporary waged job initiatives, full or part-time employment with employer incentives (six months employment with in-work support of minimum monthly contact).
- Ad-hoc support such as employer support and support received through multi-agency partnerships.

After the initial nine months, young people can receive follow-up support for up to 12 weeks.

3.2.1.3 Mechanisms

By working with skilled ECs to co-create a Personalised Action Plan, young people receive highly personalised, person-centred support. The type and frequency of engagement, as well as the mode of support with the ECs is based on the young person's individual needs and preferences. This approach allows young people to feel they have agency in the relationships that form the programme.

During the core support and programme activities, ECs approach relationships in a holistic way based on participants' needs, which allows young people to see their EC as stable, reliable and someone who acts in their best interests. When needed, and with the participants' consent, ECs contact other services to gain understanding of their background, history and support circle, which allows ECs to identify potential trigger points and further personalise ways of working.

Co-developing and reviewing a personalised action plan and undertaking the individual assessment allows young people to identify their own barriers and work with their EC and their support circle to address these barriers.

Consequently, young people start to see themselves making progress, develop goal-oriented thinking, focus their aspirations for the labour market, and take steps to enter work or training.

By taking part in volunteering and job tasters, participants have the opportunity to try new activities and achieve positive outcomes, such as increased work experience and improved work-related skills. Those who take part in ILM interventions or get into temporary, full, or part-time employment, will enter the labour market with the support of their ECs as well as their employer. This continued support allows young people to address any challenges and barriers that arise in a safe, supportive environment. By developing a strong, trusted relationship with their EC and support circles, as well as by trying new activities, young people are expected to improve their self-esteem and resilience.

Finally, multi-agency partnerships, which allow participants to be referred to a full range of support, can help ECs and service providers identify gaps in support and services to address young people's needs, as well as identify and engage services for further referrals.

3.2.1.4 Outcomes

DWF provides a flexible and participant-driven programme, therefore young people taking part in it will not receive the same type of support (e.g., not all participants will take part in job tasters or get into ILM interventions), and consequently, not all of them will achieve the same outcomes, or achieve those outcomes in the same way. The next section will provide further details on the participant journey.

Overall, the programme seeks to improve participants' self-esteem and resilience, and provide them with opportunities to increase their work experience and work-related skills. In turn, this is expected to allow participants to gain employment (full or part-time). The fact that the programme also offers support while in employment for up to 12 weeks is anticipated to help young people remain in employment for at least three months, and, in the long-term, improve their mental wellbeing and financial stability.

In terms of strategic outcomes, working with multi-agency partners to refer participants into other services, is expected to increase service providers' awareness of the gaps in the provision for 16- to 24-year-olds. At the same

time, by working closely with local employers, ECs can support employers to recruit and retain young people, and to be more inclusive in their recruitment and retention practices for young people with limited work experience.

3.2.1.5 Assumptions

To ensure that DWF is able to operate as identified in the ToC, a range of assumptions have been identified within the context of the programme, its referral and delivery partners, as well as the context of County Durham.

3.2.1.5.1 Internal context:

- Adequate resources to enable ECs to have small caseloads (approximately 15 young people per EC).
- Availability of funding for employer incentives.
- Willingness to develop and implement best practice guidance for multi-agency working across DCC and the voluntary and charity sector (VCS) with NEET young people who do not traditionally receive post-16 support.

3.2.1.5.2 Partner context:

- Partners are willing to offer flexible, personalised support.
- Availability of referral network to stabilise external factors.
- Local employers are willing to try new approaches and/or participate in innovative programmes such as ILM interventions.

3.2.1.5.3 Geographical context:

- High-quality statutory data from across Durham is available to enable identification of eligible YP for DWF.
- Availability of appropriate employment opportunities, particularly in light of pandemic-related youth unemployment.
- Entrenched and/or generational barriers to ambition and employment can be addressed through intensive support.

3.2.1.6 Is the programme theory plausible?

There is a range of evidence that supports the theorised mechanisms of change. The theorised role of employment support activities is well-founded in evidence, which suggests support in completing administrative tasks

relating to job searching can impact young people's EET outcomes.[9] Furthermore, there is evidence that supported work experience and vocational training (referred to as ILM interventions and temporary wages job initiatives in the programme theory) can work well, particularly for more vulnerable young people.[10] Similarly, a range of industry-specific work experience and extended placements has been linked to positive outcomes for NEET young people.[11]

The role of the EC and wraparound support they offer – which is based on concrete action planning – is supported by evidence that suggests mentoring and one-to-one support, in a variety of contexts, can lead to better educational, employment, and well-being outcomes.[12]

A range of programme interventions alongside the core employment support have also been shown to have an impact on NEET young people's outcomes. Group-based learning communities and interventions designed to target motivation and confidence is linked to sustained engagement in further learning.[13] And several studies have shown that life skills training and formal work training opportunities can lead to positive effects on employment outcomes and raise engagement in education and training.[14]

As such, we view the programme theory as plausible with the particular focus on employment activities (from taster sessions to support placements) being particularly compelling. There is good reason to expect these interventions to

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[9] See, for example: Izzo et al. (2000), *Increasing employment earnings: extended transition services that make a difference.* Career development for exceptional individuals, 23(2); Smith et al. (2015), *Brief report: vocational outcomes for young adults with autism spectrum disorders at six months after virtual reality job interview training.* Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders; Dorsett (2006), *The new deal for young people: effect on the labour market status of young men.* Labour Economics, 13(3)

[10] Learning and Work Institute (2020), *Evidence review: what works to support 15 to 24-year olds at risk of becoming NEET?*

[11] Bond et al. (2017), *Effectiveness of individual placement and supported employment for young adults.* Early Intervention in Psychiatry, 10(4)

[12] See, for example: Mawn et al. (2017), *Are we failing young people not in employment, education or training (NEETS)? A systematic review and meta-analysis of re-engagement interventions.* Systematic Reviews, 6; Claro & Perelmiter (2021) *The effects of mentoring programs on emotional well-being in youth: a meta-analysis.* Contemporary School Psychology, 26

[13] Learning and Work Institute (2020), *Evidence review: what works to support 15 to 24-year olds at risk of becoming NEET?*

[14] See, for example: Mawn et al. (2017), *Are we failing young people not in employment, education or training (NEETS)? A systematic review and meta-analysis of re-engagement interventions.* Systematic Reviews, 6

create the outputs DWF is intending to and subsequently impact their participants' outcomes.

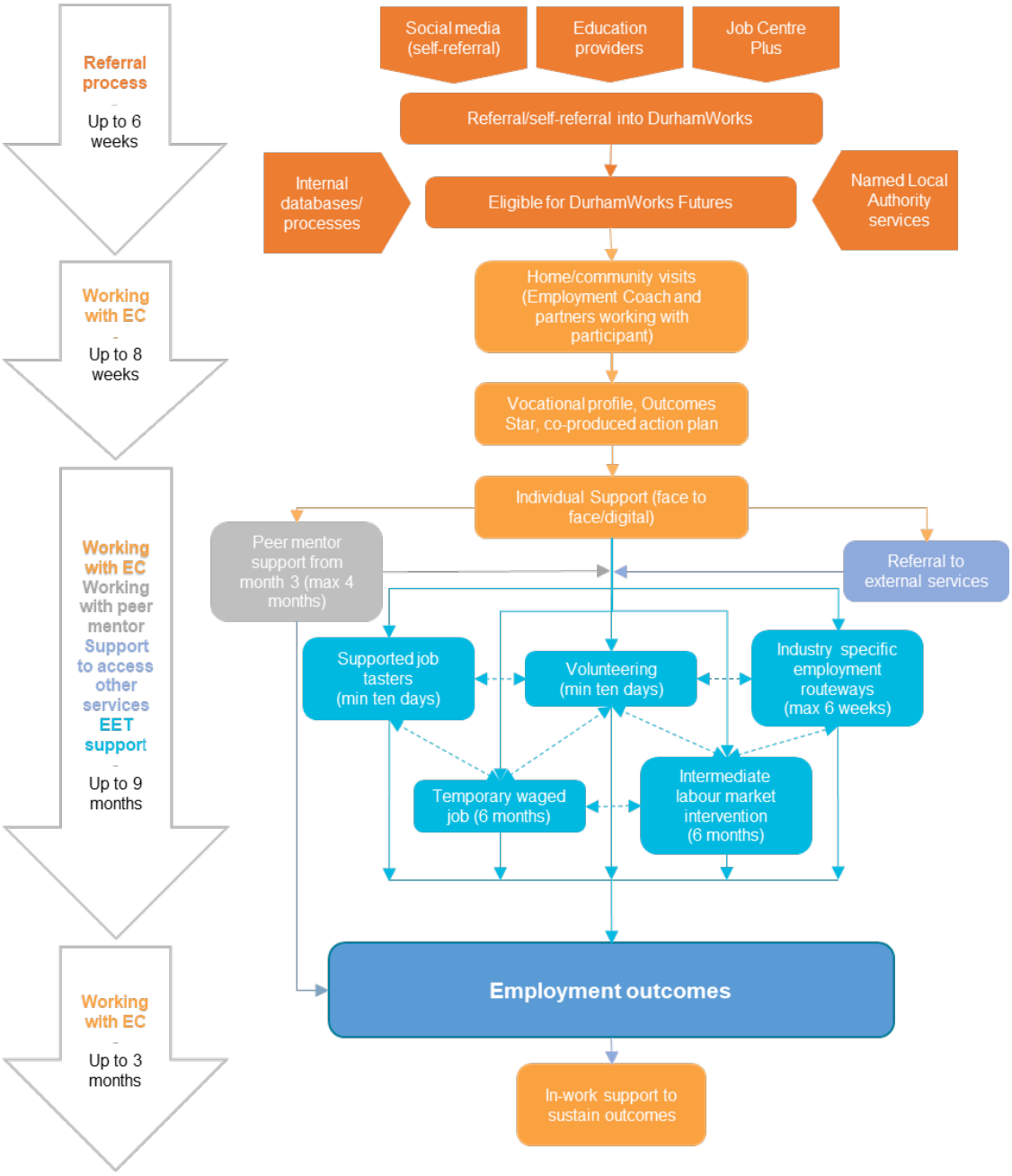
3.2.2 Journey Map

During the mobilisation stage, based on the ToC, an overview of the participant journey was developed. Figure 9 below outlines the participant journey.

As identified during the mobilisation stage and confirmed during the data collection and analysis phases, DWF provides a person-centric support, and it is adapted to the needs and interests of participants. As a result, participants' journey through the programme can vary substantially. However, the typical journey looks as follows:

- **Referrals**: referrals tend to come from education providers, Jobcentres, as well as from young people themselves (self-referral). Once referrals are reviewed and an eligibility check is conducted, participants are allocated an EC. The referral process can take up to six weeks.
- **Pre-core support work**: When participants are accepted into the programme, ECs and partners visit participants (at home or community settings) and start working to develop a vocational profile and co-produce an Action Plan.
- **One-to-one support**: As part of the core support, participants have one-to-one sessions with their EC (either in person, over the phone, or online) and are provided with different opportunities based on their needs and interests. They can be offered to engage in volunteering opportunities, supported job tasters, and industry specific employment routeways. They can also access temporary waged jobs or ILM interventions.
- **Ad-hoc support:** While working with the EC, young people can also receive peer support mentoring from month three and/or be referred to other external services.
- **Employment outcomes:** once participants achieve EET outcomes, they can still receive support form DWF during up to three months to sustain outcomes.

Figure 9: Participant Journey Map



3.3 Operation of the model in practice

This section presents the findings related to DWF's implementation and delivery in practice. It explores whether the programme was delivered as intended, how the programme develops strategic relationships, and the extent to which it adopts a No Wrong Doors approach. This section answers research questions 3, 5 and 6.

3.3.1 Was the programme delivered as intended?

This section addresses both:

- RQ3: "To what extent was the programme delivered as intended, and in what ways did implementation vary?", and
- RQ6: "To what extent does the programme adopt a No Wrong Doors approach, and how does this affect young people's support journey?".

Using qualitative data gathered in interviews with DWF strategic staff, ECs, and participants, as well as management information data and findings from digital diaries, this section explores whether DWF was delivered as intended, or whether and why variations have occurred. It also presents the enablers and barriers that have affected delivery.

3.3.1.1 Referrals

As reflected in the ToC and as explained by staff interviews, there are different referral routes including Jobcentres, education providers and self-referrals. DurhamWorks sometimes does outreach work and advertises their services in public events such as food festivals, but receiving referrals through this pathway is less common.

Case Study

(See Appendix G for the full version of Case Study 1)

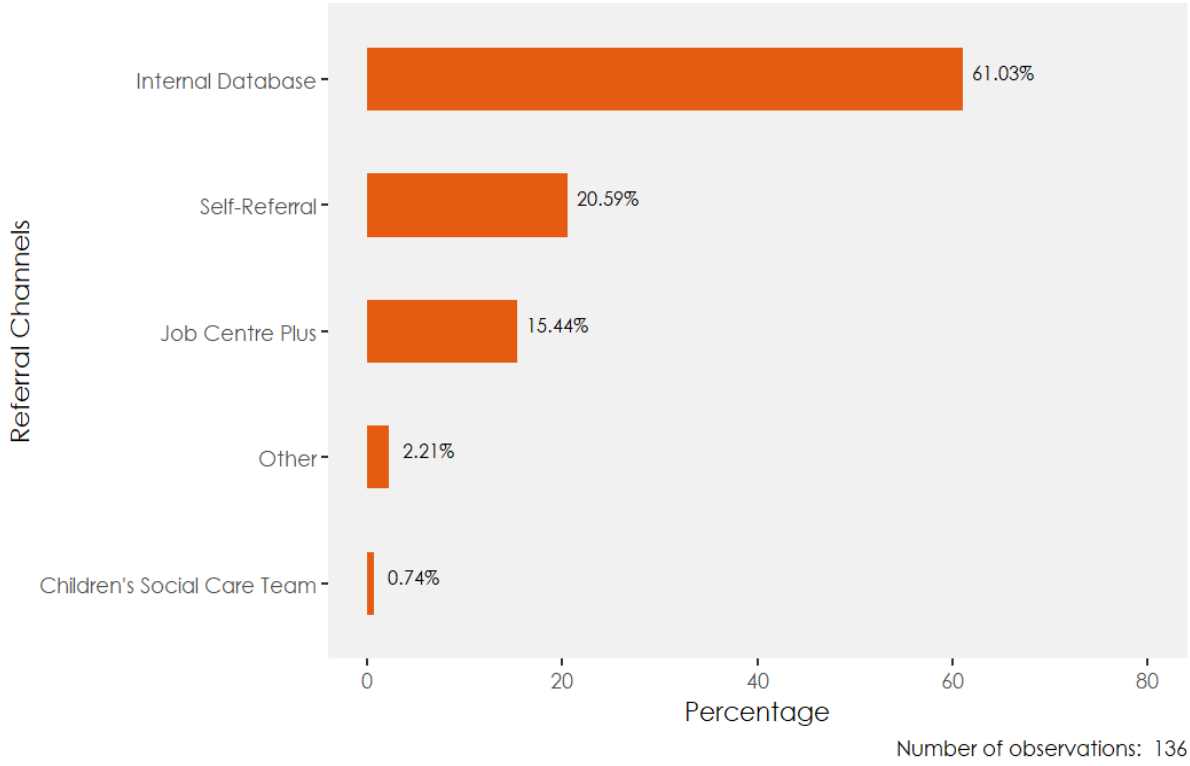
Becca briefly attended college before deciding it was not suitable for her. Afterwards, she was keen to find work and proactively looked for jobs for a period of six months, but did not manage to find one. Becca was made aware of the DWF programme at a local event and remembered hearing about its potential benefits at school. She then self-referred to DWF and joined the programme.

The variety of referral routes was confirmed in interviews with young people. Participants mentioned having been referred by work coaches in Jobcentres, Universal Credit coaches, or Groundwork staff. Some heard about the service through social media, family members, their school, youth clubs, or local newspapers, and submitted self-referrals – usually through the DurhamWorks website.

This picture is also confirmed by the management information data, where staff record referral routes. Figure 10 below shows that most referrals come

from DCC's internal database (61%) – this is a database where young people that have had contact with the Council are registered. The second most common referral route was self-referrals (around 21%), followed by Jobcentres (15%). The management information data shows that referrals coming from Children's Social Care represent a very small share of referral routes, and that referrals from outreach activities are not common.

Figure 10: DWF referral channels



Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

Once referrals were received, these were checked against DWF's eligibility criteria: NEET young people aged 16 to 24 living within County Durham with experience of Children's Social Care, SEN support, exclusion from education and/or AP.

3.3.1.2 Initial engagement with participants

After a young person had been accepted onto the programme, they were allocated an EC. Findings from qualitative interviews show that ECs would usually call young people to have a first conversation, provide more details about what DWF offers, and to hear more about what the participants want to achieve. In some instances, young people were the ones to make the first contact with the programme staff. For example, one young person who self-

referred directly called the EC, after seeing their phone number on a Facebook post advertising the programme.

In some instances, ECs also visited young people at their home, as they were uncomfortable to leave their house due to mental health barriers such as travel anxiety or social isolation (according to management information data 20% of participants in the sample faced challenges when travelling).

Overall, the initial contact and sessions with participants were considered critical to secure engagement in subsequent sessions. DWF staff were able to emphasise how their service is different to other support services young people might have accessed in the past.

> *"They [young people] don't really understand what we do, I think they think everyone does the same thing, the social worker, the key worker, you know, so it's [about] trying to explain that we do things differently." Employment Coach*

Findings from interviews with young people suggest that their feelings towards the first session and initial engagement varied. Some young people reported being very positive about their engagement from the beginning, as they did not feel nervous and felt supported straightaway. Others mentioned initially being quite nervous about engaging in the programme, as it was a new experience.

> *"I was quite nervous, because I didn't meet [EC] yet, in the beginning, for maybe two or three weeks, or something. And then I met her. But she's lovely. She's never not nice. She's always smiley and happy. And then I just wasn't nervous around them anymore, because they're just nice." Participant*

Overall, participants found the sign-up process easy and straightforward. In interviews, ECs explained that they tried to keep the sign-up process as simple and informal as possible by keeping paperwork at a minimum to avoid overburdening participants. Some participants mentioned receiving support to complete the forms (e.g., from their family or EC), and a few flagged that, while there was a lot of paperwork to go through, it was easy to fill in and it was not off-putting.

3.3.1.3 Support sought by participants

Findings from interviews with participants and staff provide insights as to why young people decided to engage in the programme. These suggest that, although some participants had already tried to independently look for job opportunities in the past, they were not successful in getting into the labour market, and others were unsure about their career aspirations. As a result, they thought that DWF could help them progress their career and find suitable employment opportunities.

Young people interviewed had a mix of previous EET experiences. Several participants mentioned having attended college for a few years and, while some of them mentioned their experience was satisfactory, others had dropped out. Findings suggest that some of those who opted to discontinue their college education and look for employment opportunities often had adverse experiences during their pre- and/or post-16 education. Some mentioned not belonging to the college environment, not being supported by teachers, or having had challenges accessing college via public transportation, reflecting the travel barriers that some young people face in the region.

> *"I'd had terrible experience with that in the past, college, secondary school, because they don't tell you anything. They expect you just to guess and hope for the best kind of thing."*
> *Participant*

ECs also flagged that the COVID-19 pandemic could have adversely impacted young people's educational experiences, reporting a lack of confidence among participants and potential gaps in meeting SEN plans during the pandemic lockdowns.

Several young people interviewed had previous experiences of other employment programmes such as Kickstart, Groundwork, or Reed, and/or had youth coaches from Jobcentres. Through these programmes, some participants were able to work on developing pre-employment-related skills by developing their CV, attending career fairs, and applying for jobs with support. Some participants were also able to secure employment in different sectors and worked in call centres or administrative roles. Overall, findings suggest that while some young people already had some previous professional experience, the opportunities they found were not sustainable

over time and they ended up being unemployed shortly after engaging in employment. Some of the reasons for leaving their roles include having to step back due to physical and mental health barriers, or not enjoying their roles.

A couple of participants who had attended similar employment programmes mentioned that they preferred DWF to these, as staff at DWF were more understanding and flexible. One participant also reported that they preferred this employment programme to others as it was easier to get to, reflecting the importance of delivering services in accessible locations. A couple of participants had worked with DWF in the past and decided to re-engage.

Case Study

(See Appendix G for the full version of Case Study 2)

Ian had good academic qualifications but lacked work experience. He engaged with a Jobcentre over a number of years after obtaining his qualification, and he got a job at a help desk, though it lasted less than a year.

Ian was hoping to get a bit more experience, skills, and money. He also wanted to develop his confidence and communication skills, and decided to join DWF after finding out through his local Jobcentre. He appreciated the personalised approach of the EC, contrasting it with previous experiences, including at the Jobcentre. He felt his EC knew him well and they were a good fit from the beginning.

3.3.1.4 Support provided

According to ECs and strategic staff interviews, the programme directly employed eight ECs from DWF, one employer engagement officer responsible for building relationships with employers, as well as a project manager. DWF also worked with three ECs and two peer mentors from Groundwork. According to strategic staff interviews, each EC managed a caseload of up to 25 young people but with varying levels of engagement. Given the bespoke nature of the support provided, some young people only engage once in a fortnight, which allowed ECs to spend more time with other participants. Findings suggest that ECs intensively worked with 16 to 18 participants simultaneously.

Insights from qualitative interviews confirm the programme's fidelity to its delivery model, as the support it offered to young people was holistic, bespoke and tailored to their preferences and needs. As will be explained in Section 3.3.1.5 No Wrong Doors Approach, DWF not only helped young people enter the labour market, but it also provided individualised support to help them stabilise their personal circumstances, such as their housing or access to benefits.

ECs emphasised the importance of identifying and listening to young people's needs and preferences to decide the focus of the core support. Through informal chats and meetings, ECs initially focused on getting to know participants better, understanding the barriers they faced, as well as their personal circumstances, such as relationships and home environment. As reflected in the ToC, this approach allowed ECs to better understand the young person's history and support circle, which could ultimately help them identify the best type of support participants needed.

> *"I worked with him [participant], asked him what all the dramas were at home, trying to look at his personal side because I think if you don't get that background and that life that they're living you can't – well you can't help them until you know what's going on." Employment Coach*

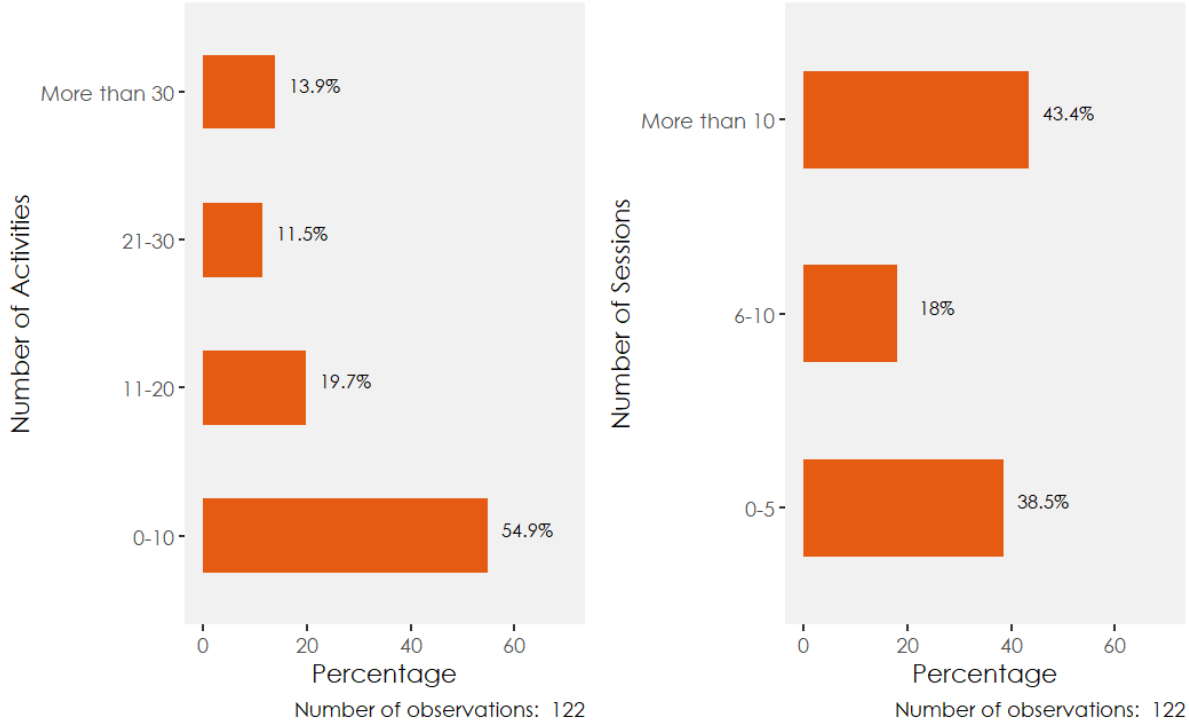
The responsive nature of the support highlighted by staff is apparent in the management information data. Participants had quite different levels of contact as represented through variable amounts of activities and sessions:

- A session refers to the number of interactions that the EC had with the young person, regardless of the purpose of such contact.
- Activities refer to the specific task undertaken during the session.

A session can therefore be made of several activities. For instance, if a participant had a check-in with the EC and at the same time received support with a preparing for an interview, two activities and one session would be recorded. As shown in Figure 11, most participants recorded more than 10 sessions with DWF staff but a significant minority had 5 or less sessions in their support journey. Similarly, most recorded less than 10 activities, but a significant minority took part in over 10 activities. Together, these numbers

indicate DWF is a programme that is flexible and largely driven by the participants' engagement, rather than adherence to set milestones.

Figure 11 Number of activities and sessions attended by DWF participants



Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

Below, we also provide some contextual information on the average duration of the programme for participants who attended different number of activities and sessions.

Table 4 Average length of participant's engagement per number of activities

Number of activities	Average duration in programme (months)
0-10	7
11-20	12
21-30	12
More than 30	13
Source: DCC Administrative Records	

Table 5 Average length of participant's engagement per number of sessions

Number of Sessions	Average duration in programme (months)
0-5	6
6-10	10
More than 10	12
Source: DCC Administrative Records	

The relative prevalence of different activities engaged with by participants also indicates DWF is flexible to participants' needs and interests. As Table 6 shows, a majority of participants included in the sample received information and guidance interventions and directly engaged with their ECs, whilst smaller (but still considerable) numbers were referred to other services by DWF staff, and almost half received specific employment support.

Table 6: Percentage of participants who engaged with each type of activity during DWF engagement.

Activity Types	% Of Participants Who Engaged With Activity
Advocacy	24.2
After Care and Support	23.2
Direct Engagement	87.9
Employment Support	46.5
IAG	80.8
Other Assistance	35.4
Referral Support	42.4
Vocational and Action Planning	30.3
Workshops/Sessions/Activities	4.0
Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data	

A key aspect that ECs focused on was their confidence in looking for jobs. As previously mentioned, ECs and strategic staff reported that a majority of participants struggled with their confidence, which generally hindered their search for employment. To address this, ECs worked with participants to help them identify their strengths and transferrable skills so that these could be used to enhance their CVs and help participants become more aware of their skills. Young people also reported talking about barriers to employment, working on building up their confidence and communication skills, as well as having informal chats with their ECs.

"[In the sessions, I would] Just talk to her [EC], anything that's basically on my mind. If there's anything or issues I have or if I feel down or something, I can talk to her about it. (…) Basically, just that support of how to cope with it as well"
Participant

When needed, ECs also offered advocacy support to help young people access Universal Credit, get a provisional driving license, pay for transport, as well as secure housing. This approach aligns with the No Wrong Door model, further explained in the next section of the report. For instance, a participant mentioned that their EC helped them secure a flat – at a time of housing instability – within two weeks. This demonstrates ECs' ability to be accessible and responsive to young people's needs as they arose, ensuring the support was person-centred.

Based on participants' needs, ECs could also make referrals to external counselling and mental health support services. However, an EC mentioned that DWF does not have faster routes that allow participants to access mental health support such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) quickly, and therefore young people tend to be put on waiting lists. In the case of CAMHS, an EC reported that the waiting list was over three years.

As reflected in the ToC, participants could benefit from the opportunity to be paired with peer mentors from Groundwork, who would support young people with practical tasks, such as travel training to help young people feel more comfortable traveling on public transport, and taking them shopping for interview clothes. Peer mentors were usually young people themselves who could relate to participants, as they had gone through similar experiences. The costs of these activities – such as travel training or buying interview clothes – were covered by the Flexible Fund. This fund allowed DWF to remove some barriers to accessing the programme or employment that participants faced.

Another key aspect of the core support provided by ECs involved supporting young people to identify and apply for EET opportunities that suited their needs and preferences. Key activities included helping participants refine their CV, use job search websites, and prepare applications and job interviews.

In terms of education, ECs helped some participants engage in external courses and activities to gain qualifications, skills and work experience. DWF would cover the costs of these activities, if any. For instance, some participants mentioned having been referred to training courses – such as Forklift, CSCS or Maths and English courses – to build skills and enhance their CV, whilst others engaged in volunteering opportunities. When needed, DWF also ensured that participants had access to the materials and resources, such as laptops, to complete e-learning courses. Overall, we found that participants generally enjoyed the additional activities they engaged in and found value in them.

> *"The one I really did enjoy is going through training courses, that's what I really enjoyed because it gave me something to do, actual skills building that up so I can put it on a CV, then a certificate. And I believe that's what actually got me the job in the first place." Participant*

In terms of employment, several young people mentioned that ECs helped them identify roles and job opportunities that matched their skillsets and interests. For this, ECs would discuss with participants what areas of work they were interested in and explore ideal roles they could do based on their current skillset. If further skills were needed to pursue a job, ECs would support participants to access the appropriate training.

Overall, participants interviewed were positive about the focus of the sessions and the support they received from DWF staff. In interviews, participants particularly emphasised the importance of the good relationships they had established with staff.

> *"Honestly, I couldn't be thankful and grateful enough to be here, doing what I'm doing, with the people I'm with. Because I'm so fragile, and anxious, and just emotional, as a person, that I feel like, if I was anywhere else, I wouldn't be able to cope." Participant*

Participants thought that ECs were able to tailor the support to their needs and generally shared EET opportunities that matched their skillsets and preferences, which aligns with the programme's anticipated delivery model of offering personalised support. The intensive support from ECs was considered a key element of the programme by strategic staff, as it allowed

ECs to not only provide information and advice but also guide young people through different career options.

Case Study

(See Appendix G for the full version of Case Study 2)

When Ian first joined DWF, he was not very open, and initial interactions with his EC were challenging. At the beginning, their sessions primarily focused on understanding Ian's needs and preferences. His EC helped him create a CV and showed him how to do a job search. They also discussed future plans, explored different career paths, and looked to address Ian's goal of getting into employment. While Ian first had retail, graphic design and entertainment in mind, his EC did not think he was ready for this, so she put forward some different ideas that Ian was enthusiastic about.

Some of those who had previously attended other employment programmes thought that DWF provided a more personalised, practical, and thoughtful approach to support, as ECs were able to get to know participants more in-depth and hence identify more appropriate ways to support them.

> *"It's [DWF] been a lot more specific towards what I'm interested in. Because we've discussed, like, my personality, my history, what I like, what I dislike, a lot of the times it's tailored around that." Participant*

DWF was also able to provide participants with access to temporary or full-time waged jobs, and ILM opportunities. The ILM element was delivered by Groundwork, and consisted of providing approximately 45 six-month paid placements. DWF would provide the salaries of young people on ILMs, encouraging employers to work with them. DWF staff reported that they could offer part-time ILMs to those participants who struggled with full-time positions, and confirms the programme's flexible and bespoke support approach.

ILMs were seen as one of the most impactful elements of the programme by DWF staff. In order to be able to offer suitable placements to participants, DWF worked to identify appropriate employers who could understand what young people needed. Section 3.3.2 provides further information on how DWF established relationships with employers.

To further ensure that young people were placed in suitable ILM opportunities and employers were able to effectively support participants while they were in their job, ECs and Groundwork staff shared information about participants' needs (with the participants' consent). They also involved young people in the conversation, to ensure they felt in control of the situation and could advocate for the type of support they thought they required. Groundwork also provided participants with an induction to help them with the transition process.

Some of the roles that participants secured include warehouse operatives, retail worker, support worker, and receptionist. Section 3.4 provides further details on the types of work experience, qualifications and opportunities young people have been able to access by engaging with DWF.

3.3.1.5 No Wrong Doors Approach

Whilst it is not an explicit feature of the programme theory, a No Wrong Doors approach appears to be an underlying principle of DWF's support model. This approach can be summarised as follows: no matter what a participant's starting point is, or how they initially access DWF services, they will be connected to the support that is right for them and is responsive to their needs. Findings from participants and staff interviews have been used to answer RQ6 "To what extent does the programme adopt a No Wrong Doors approach and how does this affect young people?".

The No Wrong Doors approach is most visible in DWF staff's willingness and ability to refer their participants to a range of external services and opportunities that meet a variety of different needs and help reduce barriers to employment. For example, ECs frequently refer participants to counselling, academic tutoring, skills training, and courses provided by external providers such as the Prince's Trust. Participants reported that they found significant value in the range of additional opportunities offered to them.

> *"Then obviously the volunteering it's kept me out of my shell, so I didn't get back into like the rut. So, I'm going forward instead of going backwards." Participant*

Another interviewee linked the diverse range of employment support, indicative of a No Wrong Doors approach, directly to their employment outcome.

" I really did enjoy going through training courses […] actual skills building that up so I can put it on a CV, then a certificate. And I believe that's what actually got me the job in the first place." Participant

In DWF, the No Wrong Doors Approach is applied with a particular focus on moving young people towards employment. DWF recognises that in working with young people facing complex barriers and difficult circumstances other services may be better placed to support them. DWF cannot fix every barrier in-house but are confident that they can help young people access the necessary services that address their immediate needs.

"[We have] a worker in a specific part of [the County] who knows that area very well. So although we don't operate things such as food banks and support with gas and electricity, we always know where we can refer those young people onto." Strategic Staff

Overall, the No Wrong Door approach is embedded into DWF's approach as far as it is intended in the programme theory. That is, it is not an explicit ethos of the programme, but aspects of the approach are evidently present in how staff members approach their work with participants.

3.3.1.6 Communication with, and engagement of, participants

Findings from interviews show that the communication arrangements and the frequency of participants' engagement depend on the young person's needs and their personal circumstances, as reflected in the programme's planned delivery model.

Management information data shows that, on average, participants' duration in the programme was 9 months – ranging from 1 to 17 months. This shows a significant degree of variation in engagement. Generally, ECs met with young people once a week, yet in some instances, they met every two weeks. For some, the frequency of engagement changed throughout the programme, with some young people reporting having sessions more often at the beginning of the programme and being in touch with their ECs less frequently once they came closer to employment.

Findings suggest that participants and EC usually met in person for their weekly sessions, and most also kept in touch in-between sessions over the

phone (either via text or calls) to have informal chats and send across new opportunities that could interest participants. The location of the meetings changed depending on the participants' preferences and needs. For instance, ECs could do home visits when participants did not feel comfortable leaving their house due to mental health barriers. Some young people did travel to DWF offices, while others met their ECs in community spaces near where they lived.

Overall, participants interviewed reported being very satisfied with the level and type of communication they had with their ECs, and felt they had control over the frequency of their engagement.

Case Study

(See Appendix G for the full version of Case Study 3)

Initially, Damon and his EC met in weekly face-to-face meetings and had frequent phone and text communication. Damon's trust grew as their relationship developed. Their sessions varied from formal to informal, discussing strengths, ideal jobs, CV fine-tuning, interview preparation, and exploring options in hospitality. Damon expressed satisfaction with the level of communication and the reliability of his EC's support.

"I'd say [the communication with my EC was] quite excellent, quite excellent, yeah." -Damon

In terms of agency during the sessions, findings suggest that ECs frequently led the sessions – especially if young people faced communication barriers – yet young people were provided with the opportunity to suggest what they wanted to focus on. Some young people reported that they and their ECs both guided conversations. Generally, those participants who commented on this expressed content with the approach ECs took during the sessions.

"I find it much better when someone starts a conversation because then I don't have to [laughs] plan out first."
Participant

ECs reported facing several challenges when trying to engage with participants, as some young people were very hard to engage and missed sessions frequently without giving notice. The lack of engagement of some participants was seen as "frustrating" by ECs, who tried different approaches

to re-engage young people. This was typically done over the phone, with ECs calling regularly to check in with participants, or sending them new vacancies to boost engagement. If time allowed, ECs could also do home visits.

Case Study

(See Appendix G for the full version of Case Study 1)

During the initial engagement phase, Becca exhibited inconsistent attendance and limited responsiveness to appointments and opportunities offered by her EC. She often failed to attend scheduled appointments and did not respond to texts regarding potential opportunities, attributing her absences to personal reasons. Despite these challenges, Becca's EC continued to follow up with her to offer assistance. Over time, they worked together to conduct job online searches, widening their search to include apprenticeships. Despite her low engagement throughout the programme, Becca expressed feeling comfortable with her EC and grew into the relationship. She felt her EC knew her well, and felt she was appropriately supported.

In line with the programme's planned delivery model, DWF staff acknowledged the importance of building trust and relationships with young people through regular communication. Being a good listener and investing time in getting to know participants was key to help ECs provide adequate support.

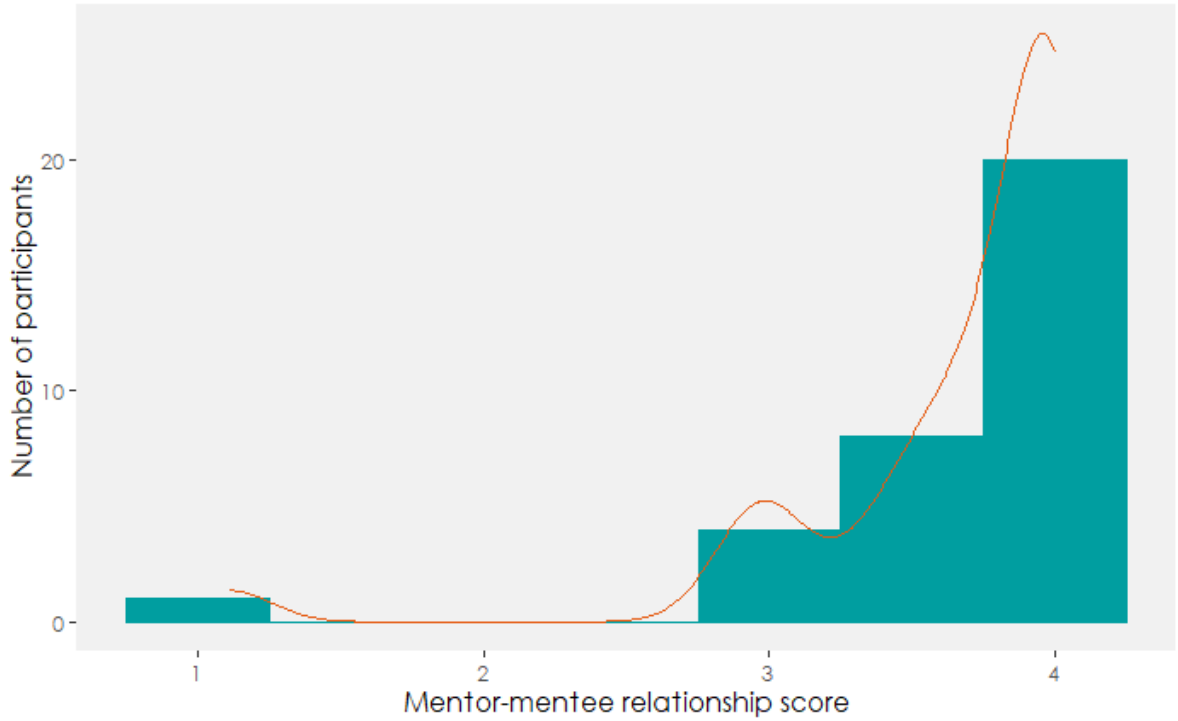
Overall, findings from participant interviews and digital diary tasks suggest that they were able to establish positive relationships with their ECs. Participants thought ECs were friendly and open, which allowed them to build healthy working relationships and also encouraged young people to open up about their needs and goals.

> *"She's [EC] been quite open and helped me be open as well. So, I started talking about my autism and stuff. I'd only talk about that to certain people." Participant*

This was also shown by the participants' perception of the quality of the EC-participant relationship, as captured in the endline survey. Participants were asked a set of questions to assess the relationship they had with their ECs, which was then aggregated into a score. Figure 12 shows the distribution of

the responses, where four represents highest relationship quality. Overall, 87% of the participants scored the quality of the relationship between 3 and 4 points.

Figure 12: DWF participants' EC-participant relationship score



Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

While some participants reported having had a high level of trust towards their ECs since the beginning of their engagement, others mentioned that trust was built overtime, through regular contact either face-to-face or over the phone. Building trust also enabled young people to open up, feel more comfortable, and enjoy the sessions.

> *"[At the beginning it was] a bit nerve wracking because obviously you never know what's happening. But like sometimes when I meet [EC] I'm like almost looking forward to it, it's like oh I've got a meeting (…) and it's like oh like I'm almost running down there to meet them." Participant*

3.3.1.7 Factors that ensured the programme was delivered as intended

DWF employed various resources and inputs to deliver the different activities outlined in the ToC and reflected in the sections above. During qualitative interviews and workshops, strategic staff and ECs reflected on the most

important resources and enablers that helped them deliver the programme. These were:

- **Strong, qualified team**: According to strategic staff, DWF sought to recruit staff that had prior experience working in youth work, social care or housing so that their skills could be transferred into this role. As will be explained in Section 3.4.2, DWF also offered them training opportunities to enhance their skills and ensure they were ready to effectively support young people. The county-wide team was seen as the key success factor for delivering the programme. ECs were seen as knowledgeable, flexible and committed by strategic staff, who flagged that it was not always easy to recruit for youth work professionals in Durham.

> *"So, to me if we didn't have the team we had it might not have been as successful. It's imperative that you have a good team there doing that with good support." Strategic Staff*

- **Effective caseload management**: The reduced number of young people that ECs would work with was also seen as a key success factor. Having a small caseload (approximately 15-20 participants) allowed ECs to invest a significant amount of time in identifying the best ways of working with young people, and building professional relationships.
- **Access to employer grants and strong employer relationships**: As will be outlined in Section 3.3.2, DWF is reliant on strong relationships with employers to ensure young people can access ILM opportunities and employment. Employer grants, which cover the wages of participants, were seen as key to bring employers on board. The role of the employment engagement officer was a crucial facilitator to ensure DWF participants could work for suitable and supportive employers.
- **Access to community venues**: As mentioned throughout this chapter, young people in County Durham face severe travel barriers that make it difficult for them to travel around the county. For this reason, DWF emphasised the importance of ensuring that sessions with ECs could take place in accessible locations and venues that participants could easily travel to. The fact that the programme was delivered by a Local Authority allowed ECs to access multiple venues and hubs around the county, such as libraries and other community buildings free of charge.

- **Effective co-delivery with Groundworks**: Strategic staff and ECs reported that the collaboration with Groundworks to deliver the programme was very successful. The communication between the two teams worked well, which allowed ECs and Groundwork staff to share relevant information about young people's needs.
- **Funding availability**: Availability of funding as well as having access to the Flexible Fund were essential resources for the delivery of the intervention, yet strategic staff flagged that funding constraints were sometimes a problem for the delivery of the programme, as lack of funding can affect the programme' sustainability.

3.3.1.8 In Summary

Findings from qualitative interviews with staff and participants, as well as management information data, and insights from digital diaries, suggest that the programme was delivered as intended. DWF was able to offer support tailored to young people's needs and goals. They provided one-to-one sessions with ECs to help young people advance towards employment, and they also offered advocacy support and enabled referrals to external services such as counselling. For those who were ready to move towards employment, ECs helped them identify suitable ILM opportunities that would match their interests and skills.

ECs adopted their working and communication style to the preferences of participants and considered any complex needs that participants might have, as anticipated by the programme's planned delivery model. Section 3.4 discusses the impact of adopting a No Wrong Doors approach, which allows young people to access multiple services and take part in different activities within the same programme (or externally but facilitated by the programme). It delves into the effects of this approach on young people and the underlaying mechanisms.

3.3.2 The role of external relationships

This section address RQ5: "How does the programme develop strategic relationships with programme partners and service providers, and how does this affect young people's support journey?".

As shown in the ToC model, DWF is heavily focused on creating employment opportunities for their service users. Generating these opportunities relies

heavily on a network of employment partners, as well as partners who provide other services. As such, building successful relationships that maintain this network is central to DWF's operation. To understand how these relationships are developed and function in practice, we combine insights from interviews with frontline and strategic staff, frontline staff workshops, management information data analysis, and interviews and surveys with programme partners. Interviews with service users are also used to explore the impact that DWF's wider relationships have on the support journeys young people experience. We also explore how relationships are built and maintained with referral partners, external service providers, and participants and their families.

3.3.2.1 How are relationships with different partners built and maintained?

In interviews and workshops with frontline and strategic staff, it was clear that relationships with employers are at the centre of DWF's support model. The ECs take a proactive role in building and maintaining these relationships to generate opportunities for their participants. Developing relationships with employers that can facilitate an ILM or grant-funded employment opportunity were seen as particularly important, given the perceived impact that these opportunities have. To do this, ECs spend time reaching out (via phone and email) to employers in the area to see if opportunities can be created. And in so doing they are guided by their clients' interests, previous experiences and their own knowledge of employers in the area. Open communication and ongoing dialogue are at the centre of their approach. For example, ECs will visit employers in person, phone employers to discuss their clients' needs, and use their knowledge of different sectors to demonstrate to employers they understand the workplace in question. This approach ensures that employers are able to meaningfully engage with the cohort.

> *"[The ILM employers] know what barriers, and backgrounds, and home life, and past life [the participants] had, so they wanted to give them an opportunity." Employment Coach*

ECs maintain their relationships with employers by emphasising in conversations that they are, in the words of one EC, "here to help". ECs offer participants support once they have entered a placement or employment opportunity and continue their dialogue with employers as the young person

progresses. Employers that we interviewed recognised these efforts are important to the relationships they enjoyed with DWF staff.

> *"[DWF] send out the details of people that would be suitable, and they've been helpful if ever we've needed any more information […] they're in contact every couple of weeks" Employer*

Strategic staff have invested in supporting this aspect of the ECs role by recruiting an Employment Engagement Officer who works alongside ECs. This role is designed to relieve ECs of some of the employer identification and relationships building work that is needed to generate employment opportunities.

> *"So I work quite closely with the employment engagement officer and that's been a real big help because we've done a lot of joint working together, you know, using their local knowledge and knowledge they already have and the links with employers" Employment Coach*

The strategic staff interviews suggested that the creation of the role has been extremely successful as they can commit time to building meaningful, familiar relationships with employers. They have a network of employers that they are in regular contact with that ECs, given their other commitments, would not have time to maintain. This has resulted in strong relationships with employers, according to interview staff.

> *"We've got good employers, good supportive employers who get the young'uns" Employment Coach*

One observation of an ILM confirmed the insights gained in interviews and workshops. In this observation, we accompanied a DWF peer mentor to visit their client onsite at their work placement. It was clear that the DWF staff had a friendly, relaxed relationship with the employer and that they could transparently and productively discuss the progress and recent work of the young person.

Relationships with other services in and outside the county council are also strategically important to DWF. These types of partners provide referrals to the DWF programme and, concurrently, DWF staff refer their clients to the services provided by them.

As reflected in Section 3.3.1.1, referrals come from a variety of streams. Whilst only a few of the research participants are referred by some of these sources, they include: other local authority services, such as a leaving-care team or virtual school, other council employment support programmes, schools and colleges, and word of mouth. DWF staff take advantage of their position within Durham County Council to build networks that generate referrals. Interviews with frontline and strategic staff indicated that DWF's position within the county council gave them unique opportunities to build relationships; for example, DWF is able to advertise within council buildings and at council events, and they work closely alongside other council services, such as the more mainstream DurhamWorks offer, to get direct referrals.

DWF staff also spend time building relationships with non-council service providers to boost referrals. ECs visit local Jobcentres to build relationships with individuals. Staff report that where they are known to a specific contact at a Jobcentre, the relationship they have is stronger. Pre-existing relationships can enable a strong personal link to be formed but ECs also "sell" themselves and the DWF programme to Jobcentre staff in order to develop strong relationships. Throughout their engagement with Jobcentre staff, DWF staff report that they emphasise the value-add of the programme and stay in touch with their clients' job coaches to provide updates and demonstrate how DWF is moving them towards employment. Strategic staff also commented that the reputation that DurhamWorks has in the area, and the growing knowledge of the DWF brand has helped to move relationships with referral partners forward. Their online presence and advertising materials have also helped kickstart these important relationships, according to strategic staff – as such, they believed investment in these resources was beneficial to relationship building.

Beyond referrals, relationships with council services and other providers play a critical role in the DWF programme by giving ECs a range of support options to which they can refer their clients. As with the relationships that underpin the referral process, these relationships with external providers are often built on informal networks, as well as the local knowledge that individual staff members have, and the reputation that the service has in the area.

"In this kind of job you kind of go around in circles. You know, you work with somebody in a previous job and then you kind of stay in the same kind of circles." Strategic Staff

The position of DWF within the county council is again used to develop and maintain relationships with external support providers. DWF staff regularly check in with their colleagues that provide other services and spend time coordinating the network of support that is available to the young people they work with.

"When you're coordinated and you communicate and you know what each other are doing, the young person feels like they're listened to and they're at the centre of everything, as opposed to you just going off and working in a silo."
Employment Coach

The other relationships that are significant to programme delivery are those between DWF staff and the service users themselves. Frontline staff that we spoke to in interviews and workshops approach these relationships in a similar fashion. Open, ongoing communication that is flexible to the individual needs of their clients defines their relationship building ethos. ECs emphasised that listening to the young person and responding to their needs is fundamental to a healthy relationship.

"it was more about listening to what he liked, and what he wanted to do, and just let him come up with his own ideas"
Employment Coach

Home visits or meeting their clients in a place they are familiar with was a practical step that many ECs reported taking to build a comfortable and open relationship with their service users. Taking advantage of informal opportunities to further develop meaningful relationships was also seen as important by the ECs – for example, in a workshop, staff discussed how brief conversations whilst travelling to and from work opportunities had been extremely productive in building a trusting relationship with their clients.

DWF staff also emphasised the importance of building relationships with the families and other significant individuals in their clients' lives. Their approaches to building these relationships is guided by the young person. In a workshop with ECs, several participants commented how they spend time getting to

know families in informal settings, such as during home visits, as long as the young person agreed to this.

3.3.2.2 How do these relationships affect participants' support journey?

From the point of view of programme staff, the relationships they have built with external partners and employers are fundamental to providing their participants with a successful support journey.

The flexible, person-centred approach that is at the heart of the programme theory is enabled by a network of service providers that DWF staff can rely on as a result of their positive relationships with them.

> *"[Referring to other services] was critical because they've got a lot of barriers, and we are not experts in housing, we're not experts in health...So we do need other people to come in and offer their support." Strategic Staff*

These networks also had positive impacts on delivery staff as it allowed them to provide a better service. In a staff workshop, one EC commented that successful support came from realising that the support journey was not just their responsibility and that they had a network of support to draw upon to deliver meaningful support to young people who faced a range of challenges.

Relationships with employers were also seen as critical by programme staff. The key benefit that staff saw in maintaining positive relationships with employers was the amount of opportunities these could generate for the service users. ECs highlighted that employers who were known to them could provide multiple placements and opportunities for their clients.

The benefits of open relationships in which knowledge could flow freely between DWF staff and employers were also highlighted in employer interviews. One employer explained how they were able to streamline their recruitment processes by working collaboratively with DWF.

> *"So, they've narrowed it all down so that when it comes to us we kind of have someone that literally wants to work here, and we don't have to look and filter it out ourselves."*
> *Employer*

Employers also explained that the ongoing supportive relationships offered by DWF meant their employees generally made more positive starts to work

placements, and that their capacity to support young people facing multiple barriers was improved.

The opportunities created for participants by the strong employer relationships were mentioned in a number of participant interviews. The significance of ILMs, in particular, was frequently discussed. Those that were able to obtain a placement commented that the ILMs gave them a range of skills and introduced them to a variety of potential employment paths beyond the placement.

Overall, the way in which DWF staff, at both a strategic and frontline level, build and maintain relationships appears to be working well. Staff adeptly utilise their position within the network of local support and this enables them to build a range of meaningful relationships that generates referrals and improves the quality of support they can offer. Moreover, their approach to building employer relationships generated opportunities that are significant to participants' journeys. The relationships they have often rely on the work of individual ECs and strategic staff, but the DWF brand and position within their local area underpins the work they do. Consequently, they are able to provide a range of support and employment opportunities to their clients and maintain strong referral routes from a range of sources, as shown in Section 3.3.1.1

3.4 Evidence of promise

This section presents the findings related to the programme's evidence of promise. It explores whether the programme led to any perceived impacts among participants, especially on young people (addressing RQ1 and RQ2), as well as on ECs, employers and service providers (addressing RQ4).

3.4.1 Impact on young people

This section addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: "What is the association between increasing levels of engagement with DurhamWorks Futures and a range of outcomes, including, a) uptake of employment, education or training opportunities, b) retention of employment opportunities, c) labour market experience, d) self-esteem, e) resilience, f) mental wellbeing, and g) work-related skills?"
- RQ2: "What are the drivers of the associations (or absence of association) observed?"

The specifics of the dosage-response analysis are presented in Appendix D, under the analytical specification section. Focal outcomes were agreed with DCC and YFF as part of the scoping phase, and were measured as follows:

- EET status, the likelihood of being in employment, education and/or training. This was measured by management information data captured by DWF.
- The 'soft' outcomes, measured via baseline, midline and endline surveys:
  - Wellbeing[15], as measured by the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale. This indicator is composed by 7 items.
  - Resilience, as measured by the Early Adolescent Resilience Scale (EARS). This indicator is comprised of 9 items.
  - Work readiness, as measured by the adapted Life Skills Development Scale. To make it relevant for the purpose of this analysis, 5 questions were extracted from the careers-decision making section of the scale.
  - Self-esteem, measured by the Rosenberg Self-esteem scale (RSES) comprises 4 items.

3.4.1.1 Outcomes at Baseline

This section presents young people's starting point when they joined the programme with regards to the outcomes of interest. This section excludes the outcome EET status, given that as part of the eligibility criteria into the programme, participants should be NEET at baseline. This section therefore focuses only on the soft outcomes assessed in this evaluation, covering wellbeing, resilience, work readiness and self-esteem.

Table 7 provides a summary of the starting conditions of the participants in DWF. The results are computed on the basis of the participants who completed the baseline survey.

[15] We want to remind the reader that instead of aggregating the items values to create the scores for the soft outcomes, we estimated the average score of the provided responses. This helped in maximising the number of available observations that we were able to include in the analysis, as we adjust the score for the number of items responded for each outcome, avoiding having to drop participants if they did not complete all the items per outcome.

Table 7: DWF participants' soft outcomes at baseline

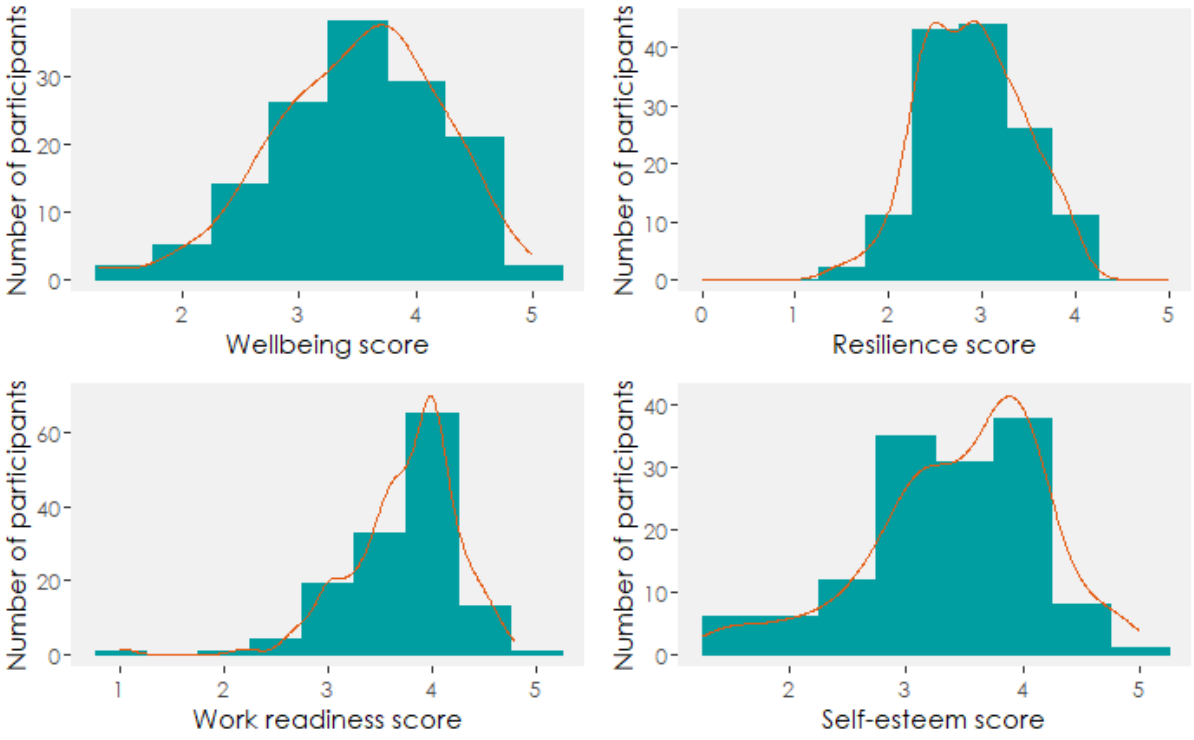
Outcome	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	St Dev	Obs
Wellbeing	3.5	3.6	1.3	5.0	0.7	137
Resilience	2.9	2.9	1.4	4.0	0.5	137
Work readiness	3.7	3.8	1.0	4.8	0.5	137
Self-esteem	3.5	3.7	1.2	5.0	0.8	137
	Central tendency measures on soft outcomes from DWF participants. Source: KCL analysis of DWF participants' survey responses					

Anxiety, low self-esteem, low confidence and low aspirational levels were all prevalent among young people accessing support from DWF, according to strategic staff and ECs interviewed. Many participants had challenging family lives and negative experiences in education and professional settings. At the same time, DWF staff observed that the COVID-19 pandemic fuelled an increase in social anxiety and decreased travel confidence, a trend further exacerbated by the rural landscape in parts of the sub-region, which posed a barrier to young people. For instance, management information data shows that around 20% of participants faced issues when travelling, presenting challenges to their opportunities to study and work, and around 15% of participants reported being disabled.

Baseline survey results confirm these findings; resilience was the measure in which participants reported lower scores. In the survey, participants were asked to rank different soft outcomes from one (lowest level) to five (highest level), and the average score for resilience was 2.9, followed by self-esteem and wellbeing which scored 3.5. Moreover, while the three soft outcomes just mentioned have participants with levels from 1 to 5, the resilience of participants is capped at 4 out of 5. This indicator shows the overall low levels of resilience hold for this cohort.

Figure 13 presents the distribution of the four soft outcomes graphically.

Figure 13: Distribution of soft outcomes at baseline for DWF participants



Source: KCL analysis of DWF participants' survey responses

3.4.1.2 Analytical Specification

We conducted four regression specifications for each soft outcome, assessing the association between increasing dosage and outcomes. The dosage indicator represents a measure of impact-weighted hours of engagement. For DCC, this variable ranges from 0 to 104 hours with a mean of 6 hours and standard deviation of 15 hours.

The models are as follows:

- Model 1 models the association between increasing dosage and the outcomes of interest, with individual and time fixed effects.
- Model 2 includes a dosage^2 term, as there is some reason to think the relationship between dosage and outcomes might be quadratic.
- Model 3 uses an unweighted dosage indicator as a robustness check.
- Model 4 omits the fixed effects as a robustness check.

In the tables below we present the estimate for the main coefficient of interest in each model, which represents the association between the dosage indicator and outcome scores, i.e. it tells us if increased engagement

with DWF is linked to different outcomes. Where dosage^2 is included, the coefficient for this is also reported.

See Appendix D for additional information about the analytical specification.

3.4.1.3 Results of analysis

This section presents the results that we obtained through the regression models.

3.4.1.3.1 Education, Employment or Training

The main outcome of interest of this evaluation is young people's EET status: whether they have transitioned into Education, Employment or Training (Table 8). We find a significant and positive association between increasing engagement with DWF and likelihood of being in EET at the end of the programme. More precisely, an increase of one unit of the programme's dosage (weighted by the perceived impact of activities taken up) associates with an increase of 1.2 percentage points in the likelihood of transition towards EET. As this association holds in all models that use the weighted dosage indicator, this suggesting that activities that DCC recorded as higher impact are likely those driving this association.

Table 8: Association between DWF programme engagement and EET status

Model	Description	Dosage coefficient	Dosage^2 coefficient
1	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.012***	
2	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.031***	-0.0003*
3	Fixed Effects Model with Unweighted Dosage	-0.012	
4	Linear Model with Weighted Dosage	0.009*	

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, +p <0.1.
Model 4 includes controls for age, gender, index of multiple deprivation and highest qualification status while other models include individual and time-fixed effects. Further controls were excluded to conserve degrees of freedom in the estimations.
Weight 1: 3 (Activities ranked as 1), 2 (Activities ranked as 2), 1 (Activities ranked as 3).
Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data

3.4.1.3.2 Soft Indicators

Wellbeing is the first soft outcome that we investigated. It can be seen that the wellbeing score is positively correlated with engagement (Table 9); per Model 1, an increase of one in the dosage indicator (representing one additional impact-weighted hour of engagement with DWF) is associated with an increase of 0.011 in a young person's wellbeing.

Table 9: Associations between DWF programme engagement and wellbeing

Model	Description	Dosage coefficient	Dosage² coefficient	Baseline-Endline correlation coefficient
1	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.011**		
2	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.018*	-0.0001	
3	Fixed Effects Model with Unweighted Dosage	0.034*		
4	Linear Model with Weights	0.005		0.604***

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, +p <0.1.
Model 4 includes controls for age, gender, index of multiple deprivation and highest qualification status while other models include individual and time-fixed effects. Further controls were excluded to conserve degrees of freedom in the estimations.
Weights used: 3 (Activities ranked as 1), 2 (Activities ranked as 2), 1 (Activities ranked as 3)
Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data and DWF participants' survey responses

Given that the fixed effects models are statistically significant, which control for both observed and unobserved variables that might be correlated with wellbeing, we can have greater confidence that programme engagement is associated with improved wellbeing.

The next outcome we examined was resilience. None of our models find significant associations between dosage and resilience (Table 10). It may be plausible to suggest that the increased resilience effects of the intervention might require more time to materialise. When starting from a low baseline, participants may need a longer duration of intervention to exhibit noticeable

improvements. It is also possible that DWF did not impact participants' resilience, or that those with lower resilience required more interventions.

Table 10: Associations between DWF programme engagement and resilience

Model	Description	Dosage coefficient	Dosage² coefficient	Baseline-Endline correlation coefficient
1	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	-0.001		
2	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.010	-0.0002+	
3	Fixed Effects Model with Unweighted Dosage	-0.003		
4	Linear Model with Weighted Dosage	-0.004		0.516***

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, +p <0.1.
Model 4 includes controls for age, gender, index of multiple deprivation and highest qualification status while other models include individual and time-fixed effects. Further controls were excluded to conserve degrees of freedom in the estimations.
Weights used: 3 (Activities ranked as 1), 2 (Activities ranked as 2), 1 (Activities ranked as 3)
Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data and DWF participants' survey responses

Work readiness is the next soft outcome we explore. It captures improvements in the participants' trajectory toward employment, even if a job offer has not come across yet. We do not find a great deal of evidence that increasing time with DWF is associated with increasing work skills. The model including the quadratic term does find a significant association, suggesting that if this relationship does exist it may be non-linear.

Table 11: Associations between DWF programme engagement and work readiness

Model	Description	Dosage coefficient	Dosage² coefficient	Baseline-Endline correlation coefficient
1	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.004		
2	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.016*	0.0002+	
3	Fixed Effects Model with Unweighted Dosage	0.018		
4	Linear Model with Weighted Dosage	0.004		0.427**

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, +p <0.1.
Model 4 includes controls for age, gender, index of multiple deprivation and highest qualification status while other models include individual and time-fixed effects. Further controls were excluded to conserve degrees of freedom in the estimations.
Weights used: 3 (Activities ranked as 1), 2 (Activities ranked as 2), 1 (Activities ranked as 3)
Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data and DWF participants' survey responses

Table 12: Associations between DWF programme engagement and self-esteem

Model	Description	Dosage coefficient	Dosage² coefficient	Baseline-Endline correlation coefficient
1	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.011**		
2	Fixed Effects Model with Weighted Dosage	0.019*	-0.0002	
3	Fixed Effects Model with Unweighted Dosage	0.024		
4	Linear Model with Weighted Dosage	0.002		0.643***

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, +p <0.1.
Model 4 includes controls for age, gender, ethnicity, index of multiple deprivation and highest qualification status while other models include individual and time-fixed effects. Further controls were excluded to conserve degrees of freedom in the estimations.
Weights used: 3 (Activities ranked as 1), 2 (Activities ranked as 2), 1 (Activities ranked as 3)
Source: KCL analysis of DCC management information data and DWF participants' survey responses

We find a statistically significant association between dosage and self-esteem (
Table 12). However, when an unweighted dosage indicator is used, this association is no longer statistically significant. This might suggest that overall activities rated by DCC as being higher impact are more consistently associated with self-esteem, either because they increase self-esteem more or because participants whose self-esteem was more responsive to activities tended to take part in these activities.

3.4.1.4 Other considerations

We wish to highlight that the Baseline-Endline correlation of the wellbeing (0.604), resilience (0.516), work skills (0.427) and self-esteem (0.643) scores are strong and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Such a strong correlation, despite a small sample in the dataset is suggestive of the powerful contribution that these scales can make to the power of covariates for the overall design. These results are presented so that they can be used for power calculations, necessary for future trials and impact evaluations in the field pertaining to young people and specifically programmes designed for providing support systems to them.

We included a dosage squared variable in Model 2 to test whether the relationship between dosage and the outcomes might be non-linear. In some cases, this coefficient was statistically significant, suggesting that the association between dosage and outcomes varied depending on the level of dosage; however it was in all cases extremely small, suggesting that the impact of the non-linearity on the association is likely to be minimal.

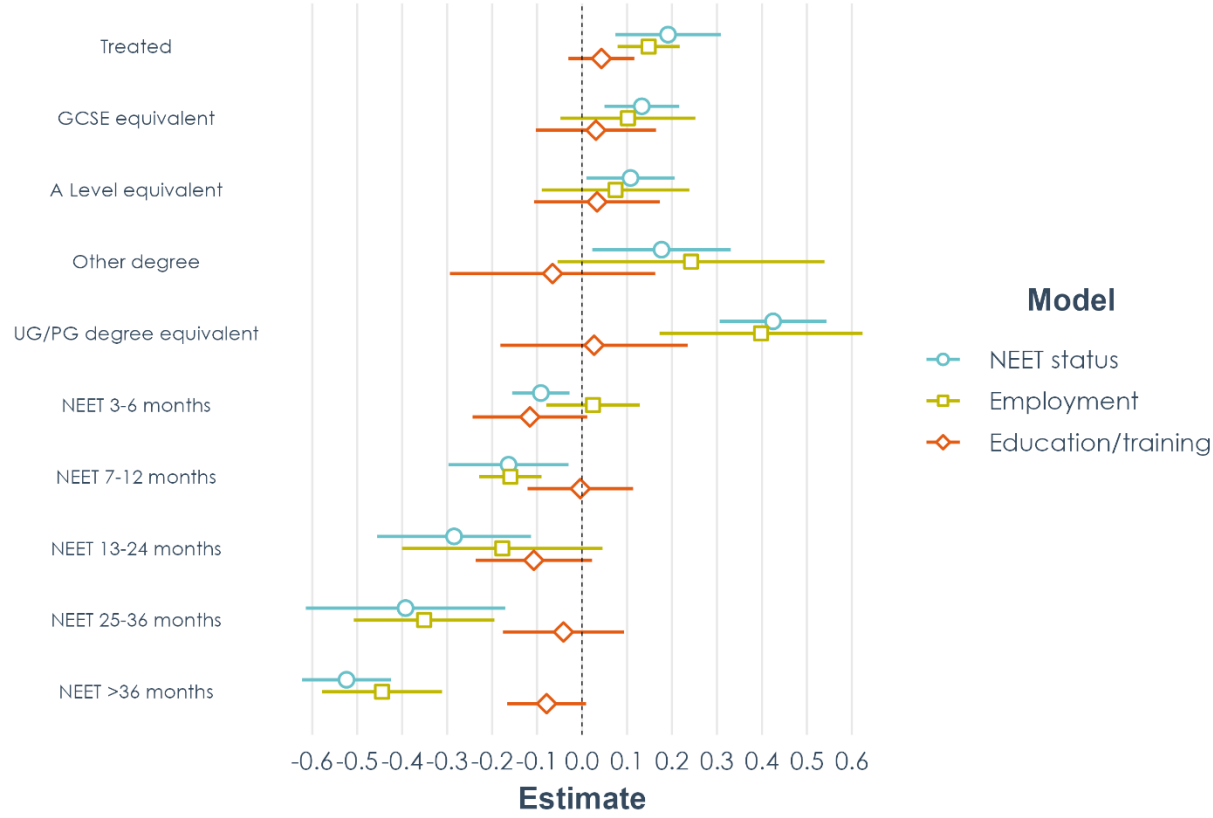
3.4.1.5 Comparison of DWF participants with a comparator group

To calculate the association between participation in DWF and the key outcomes, regression models were estimated which examined changes in NEET status, employment status, and education and training status for programme participants against a comparator group of young people derived from Understanding Society. This analysis informed the economic evaluation, presented in Section 3.4.3. Full details of the regression model, key variables, and potential limitations are discussed in Appendix E.1.

Figure 14 displays the estimated coefficients for the three regression models. The labels on the y-axis represent the variables which were included in the

regressions, whilst the x-axis represents the size of the coefficient estimate. For each variable, the figure reports the point estimated association between that variable and the key outcome of interest (change in NEET status, employment status, or education and training status). This represents the percentage point change in the probability of achieving the given outcome associated with each characteristic. The figure also displays 95% confidence intervals for the estimated coefficients.

Figure 14: Coefficient estimates from the main econometric models relating to DWF participants



Note: The above figure shows the coefficient estimates from the regression model specified in Appendix F.1. for three outcome variables (probability of transitioning away from NEET status, probability of finding employment, and probability of entering education or training) for Durham Works Futures. Each coefficient is expressed as the association between the given variable and the outcomes in percentage point terms - for example, a coefficient of 0.1 would represent a 10% increase in the probability of observing the outcome of interest. The coefficients on the 'Treated' variable represent the estimated association between participating in Durham Works Futures and the outcomes of interest. All other variables are binary indicators defined relative to some baseline level - for example, the 'GCSE equivalent' variable gives the change in probability of achieving the outcomes for those who have GCSE equivalent qualifications relative to having no formally recognised qualifications or pre-GCSE equivalent qualifications, the baseline category. Further details on the baseline categories are given in Appendix F.1.

Source: London Economics' analysis of DCC management information data and Understanding Society.

The key coefficients of interest are the coefficients on the 'Treated' variable at the top of the figure. These coefficients represent the estimated association between DWF participation and the three variables of interest (change in NEET status, employment status, and education and training status). The results suggest that participation in DWF was positively associated with transitions away from NEET status and the probability of finding employment. For example, the coefficient on change in NEET status was 0.191, suggesting that participants in DWF were 19.1 percentage points more likely to transition away from NEET status than comparator group individuals. The estimated coefficient on employment status was 0.148, suggesting that DWF participants were 14.8 percentage points more likely to find employment than comparable non-participants.

The central coefficient estimate on the probability of entering education or training was 0.043, suggesting that programme participants were 4.3 percentage points more likely to enter education or training than the comparison group. However, we cannot conclude with a high degree of confidence that the true effect was different from zero.

Table 13: Estimated impact of DWF on outcomes of interest (absolute numbers)

	Lower bound	Central estimate	Upper bound
Entered employment	11	21	30
Entered education or training	-4	6	16
Exited NEET status	10	27	43

The figures represent the estimated total difference in the number of young people who achieved the outcome specified in the left-hand column as a result of the programme. For example, the central estimate of 21 for the 'entered employment' variable suggests that an additional 21 young people entered employment due to Durham Works Futures than would have entered employment in the absence of the programme. The negative values imply that fewer people achieved the specified outcome variable than would have done in the absence of the programme. The lower and upper bounds are based on a 95% confidence interval around the central estimate.
Source: London Economics' analysis of DCC management information data and Understanding Society.

In total, there were 139 participants in the DWF programme[16]. Therefore, the central coefficient estimates suggest that the programme led to 21 more young people finding employment and 6 more people entering education or training than would have occurred in the absence of the programme, assuming that the results from the quantitative outcomes analysis are approximately the same as the actual impacts of the programme.[17] The corresponding lower and upper bounds for entry into employment were 11 and 30. The lower and upper bounds for entry into education or training were -4 (four fewer young people entering education or training than would have occurred in the absence of the programme) and 16.

The coefficients in the rest of Figure 14 show the association between each variable and the three outcome variables defined relative to some baseline category. For example, the coefficients on education level give the probability of achieving each outcome at each respective qualification level relative to having entry level or pre-GCSE qualifications. These coefficients show the association between these variables and the outcome variables for both the treatment group (programme participants) and the comparator group.

Higher levels of previous qualification attainment were associated with an increased probability of transitioning away from NEET status and of finding employment[18]. For example, those with GCSE equivalent qualifications were 13.3 percentage points more likely to transition away from NEET status compared to those with entry level or pre-GCSE qualifications. However, qualification attainment was not associated with an increased probability of

[16] This is the total number of participants who agreed to take part in the research between June and November 2022. A total of 311 young people worked with the programme from April 2022 until December 2023.

[17] The coefficient estimates presented in Figure 14 represent the estimated effect of each respective variable on the probability of observing each outcome of interest - including the probability of finding employment or entering education or training. Therefore, to estimate the impact of the programme in absolute terms, we can simply multiply the estimated coefficient on the variable of interest by the number of participants in the programme. For example, if programme participants were 20% more likely to find employment than non-participants and 100 people participated in the programme, then we can estimate that (on average) the programme would result in 20 people finding employment who otherwise would not have done so in the absence of the programme. This assumes that the true impact of the programme is similar to that found within the quantitative outcomes analysis.

[18] This finding is in relation to the entire sample, regardless of whether individuals were part of the treatment or comparator group.

entering education or training. The length of time an individual had been NEET was negatively associated with the probability of transitioning away from NEET status and of finding employment.

The estimated effect size of DWF participation on NEET status was similar to the effect size of having an 'other' degree or equivalent qualification (for example a degree-level apprenticeship or Higher National Certificate) relative to having entry level or pre-GCSE qualifications.

3.4.1.6 Implications of quantitative analysis

We find that, overall, there are positive and significant associations between increasing engagement with DWF and the likelihood of being recorded by DCC as being in EET at the end of the programme. This appears to be driven particularly by the activities identified as higher impact by DCC. We do not observe any association between increasing DWF engagement and resilience, and we see mixed results on work readiness, with Model 2 (incorporating a dosage^2 term) suggesting a positive relationship; if this holds, it would suggest that for this outcome there is some association but it is different at different levels of resilience at the start of the programme. We also see mixed results on the association between engagement and self-esteem. Overall, these results suggest that although programme engagement does have a connection to EET outcomes, it is not clear that the pathway through which this connection occurs relates to the 'soft' outcomes we have analysed.

The analysis is not causal. It is plausible that unobservable factors influence both participants' engagement with DWF and their achievement of EET, and this may exaggerate or attenuate the estimated impact of engagement on the outcomes. We have tried to minimise the impact of unobserved factors by including fixed effects and specifying a range of models, but this is an intrinsic limitation of most dosage-response models.

Likewise, comparison of the outcomes of DWF participants to a comparator group from Understanding Society suggests that DWF participants are more likely to have positive destinations than might be expected based on their demographics. This points to a potential positive effect of DWF, but may also be affected by uncaptured confounding influences.

3.4.1.7 Qualitative analysis

The interviews with young people, employers, ECs and counsellors suggest perceived improvements on young people's:

- hard outcomes, such as uptake of employment, education, training opportunities and benefits
- job-related skills, such as increased knowledge about jobs and sectors, as well as improvements in application and interviewing skills
- soft outcomes, such as improvements to confidence, interpersonal skills, mental wellbeing, resilience, and self-esteem

These will be described, in turn, in the following sections.

3.4.1.7.1 Harder outcomes

The interviews with young people and ECs covered a range of job roles, ranging from temporary and fixed-term, to full-time and permanent contracts, that young people had successfully obtained, as well as education and training opportunities. In many cases, young people and ECs attributed these directly or partly to the programme, especially to the confidence they had gained. For instance, after obtaining employment in a creative industry, an EC reflected,

> *"I just couldn't believe he had the confidence to do something like that, from what he had been prior."*
> *Employment Coach*

However, some of the senior strategic staff at DWF also reflected that inevitably the harder outcomes would be difficult to reach for some of the target group as they are initially far away from the labour market, and the focus should be on reaching the smaller, intermediary outcomes that have already been discussed. This was also mentioned by some ECs when discussing specific young people. For instance, they mentioned external barriers for the target participant group that sometimes made it hard to achieve the harder employment and education outcomes, especially in a short time period, such as breakdown of family relationship, lack of motivation, lack of encouragement from home, negative influences from peer groups and poor mental health.

3.4.1.7.2 Job-related knowledge and skills

A common theme was that the programme had increased young people's understanding of the labour market, including the different types of sectors and job roles that exist, what skills and qualifications they require, and it made them think about what roles did and did not suit them best. For instance, one young person said they had previously not had any idea about what they wanted to do, or how to go about finding opportunities, but through working with the EC they had now identified that they would like to do something with cars, or in a warehouse.

In addition to the support from the EC, this understanding was particularly gained through labour market experiences as part of the programme. For instance, a 30 hours per week placement in a daycare centre had identified a sector for a young person that they were not only qualified to do, but also enjoyed:

> *"I've really enjoyed it. It's the first job I've ever had where I actually enjoy it. I'm never checking the clock waiting to go home." Participant*

The programme, importantly, enabled young people to try out different placements and explore different types of jobs and sectors, before identifying the right opportunity, as described by this EC:

> *"That was where [he] just absolutely came to life. He loved it, they loved him, he was confident in what he was doing – it was just lovely to find his thing. So, we knew then that there would be no more of these call centres or admin jobs, this was where he wanted to be." Employment Coach*

In other cases, while the placements and ILMs had been a positive learning experience and identified a suitable sector or job role, the employer and other similar employers in the area had not had any suitable vacancies, so the young person and EC had to look at other types of roles.

Finally, young people had developed skills in writing CVs, applying for jobs and attending job interviews, through support from their EC, including mock interviews. This process also improved the confidence among some young people about their own skills. For instance, one young person said they had previously been overwhelmed when job adverts required specific skills and

qualifications, and discounted them on this basis. However, they had worked with their EC to create a list of their skills, as well as points about where they learned those skills, and where they showcased it. As an example, after working with a young person on interviewing skills, an employment coach said:

> *"He's more ready, more ready than he was, and I think when, if he does get an interview, he'll do really well, he comes across great in interviews." Employment Coach*

The skills in relation to job applications had been further helped by the experiences and skills young people had gained during labour market opportunities and training courses, which they could put on their CV. For instance, a young person who had a placement as a receptionist said they had developed their skills and understanding of clerical and administrative duties, as well as their ability to talk to people, and said they had put these experiences and skills on their CV. Similarly, another young person attributed their current employment to the training courses they had attended as part of the programme, which had helped them build up skills to put up on their CV.

3.4.1.7.3 Softer outcomes

The most prominent perceived outcome reported by participants was an increase in confidence among young people. Young people often explained that their starting point had been anxiousness or difficulty getting out of the bedroom, out of the house, on the bus, and generally entering new environments such as workplaces.

> *"I was really nervous and scared, and stuff, and not confident at all. I couldn't even get on the bus. But now, I'm like a different person, because I'm not scared anymore. I get on the bus, every single day… I'm just completely different now." Participant*

In particular, young people spoke about their lack of social and interpersonal skills, especially their lack of confidence and comfort in talking to people. ECs explained the young people sometimes couldn't make eye contact with them during the first appointment. However, often the programme helped build their confidence through trying new things and being put in environments where they were pushed to speak to a range of people, for

instance during volunteering, placements, and labour market opportunities. As a typical example, a young person, who had volunteered at a food bank, said he now spent less time worrying about upsetting people, and was more confident in approaching people than before:

> *"Speaking with people I've never seen before built my confidence up a lot. Because the first week [at the food bank] I didn't say anything to anyone, but then I've slowly started to speak to everyone." Participant*

It could also be labour market placements and ILMs, which had given them this confidence. For instance, an EC reflected back on a young person who six months previously had not been able to look them in the eye when they were talking, to them having completed an ILM in a shop and received "heartwarming" messages and cards when they left, praising them for their delightful manners and great customer service. The EC and the young person were now exploring a job opportunity involving customer service, which was possible now due to their improved confidence.

Case Study

(See Appendix G for the full version of Case Study 2)

Finishing college, Ian had good academic qualifications, but not a lot of work experience. He engaged with a Jobcentre over a number of years, and in that time, he got a job for less than a year at a help desk. Despite this, he was hoping to get a bit more experience, skills, and money, and develop his confidence and communication skills, so he decided to join DWF.

After working closely with his EC, to create a CV, do job searches, discuss future plans, and exploring different career paths, Ian's confidence grew and he finally secured a new job,. He believes his EC's support in breaking him out of his shell has helped increased his confidence. Further, he feels much better about work in the future. The last time his EC spoke with Ian, he planned to open his own business with a friend.

"I think it definitely helped with my confidence because I was never really confident. They kind of helped with that and I got a bit more talkative I suppose. That's not quite the way I'd describe it. And then I met one of my new best friends at the work placement. So that gave me another little boost as well." -Ian

It was also common for young people to gain confidence and self-belief to try new things, such as applying for a job, going to an interview, starting volunteering or starting a job. This was often attributed to having the EC providing encouragement, as well as consistent support and knowing someone would be there if anything went wrong.

> *"I can't thank them enough. I don't think I'd ever have given [this] or any of these opportunities really a go if it wasn't like 'oh, yes man, you can do this, it's fine." Participant*

Another young person had received a setback with a return of a physical injury, but found that their resilience had improved, and they avoided entering a negative spiral that had occurred before. They attributed this to the support from their EC. Another young person also spoke about volunteering as a breakthrough for them in terms of breeding more confidence:

"That's been outstanding. I can't talk enough about getting over the nerves and getting into volunteering." Participant

3.4.2 Impact on ECs, local employers and service providers

This section addresses RQ4: "To what extent does the programme develop the skills and knowledge of employment coaches, local employers and service providers?". This is particularly important as it allows us to understand whether the programme helps staff work more effectively with participants. This chapter draws on the findings from qualitative interviews with strategic staff, ECs, as well as employers.

Findings from qualitative interviews with DWF staff suggest that by taking part in the programme, they have been able to strengthen existing skills and develop new ones. Staff received a range of training and development support. When entering the programme, staff receive a mandatory in-depth induction that covers topics such as the Durham County Council values and expected behaviours. New staff are also required to shadow another staff member and are assigned a buddy for the first six months.

The programme also offers ECs support to gain a Level 3 qualification in Information, Advice or Guidance (IAG), which provides the skills necessary to support young people with careers and personal choices. It takes around 10 to 12 months to complete, and staff are allotted time off as part of their DWF work to gain the qualification. According to DWF strategic staff, this qualification is crucial to the work of DWF ECs, as providing advice and guidance is central to the programme.

DWF uses a digital system (IYSS) to record the interventions that staff deliver with young people, and includes informaton about the initial assessment as well as every type of support each young person receives. New staff were trained on how to use the system, as it was crucial to ensure ECs used it on a daily basis. A Groundwork EC, however, reported having difficulties accessing the system, as they were not DCC staff.

"We use it every day, so you really need to understand how to use that system in order to do the job properly for a variety of different reasons, safeguarding, making sure that a young person is on the right programme." Strategic Staff

Overall, training was not widely discussed by DWF ECs during the interviews, as these focused more on young people's journeys and support from the programme. As a result, there is limited evidence on DCC EC's views on the training available to them. Groundwork also provided their ECs with training opportunities. Furthermore, in staff workshops, DCC and Groundwork ECs highlighted how well supported they had felt by both strategic staff and the project team more widely, indicating that there was general satisfcation with the development opportunitites available to them.

Findings from employer interviews suggest that recruiting DWF participants has had some positive effects on employer organisations, however, given the small sample of employer interviews, findings should be treated with caution.

An organisation running a sourcing website, providing information for people with disabilities and neurodivergences, developed its working practices after providing two DWF placements. This organisation tailored their in-work support to meet the participants' needs. For example, they noticed one participant struggling to refocus on a task if interrupted by hourly check-ins. As a result the employer changed the frequency and type of support to this participant. The same employer found that some participants struggled with phone calls. This led the employer to ask an individual's communication preferences during the placement. Importantly, engaging with the programme allowed this organisation to engage disabled and neurodivergent people in their work, which was a key focus of theirs.

> *"We're quite passionate about building the website from an expert by experience viewpoint. So, we're quite passionate about employing disabled and neurodivergent people."*
> *Employer*

However, another employer working with DWF, a skip-hire company that operate a waste transfer yard, did not describe any impact on skills or knowledge, after taking on DWF young people. Instead, the impact on the business was solely financial.

3.4.3 Monetary benefits associated with the impact on employment and education outcomes

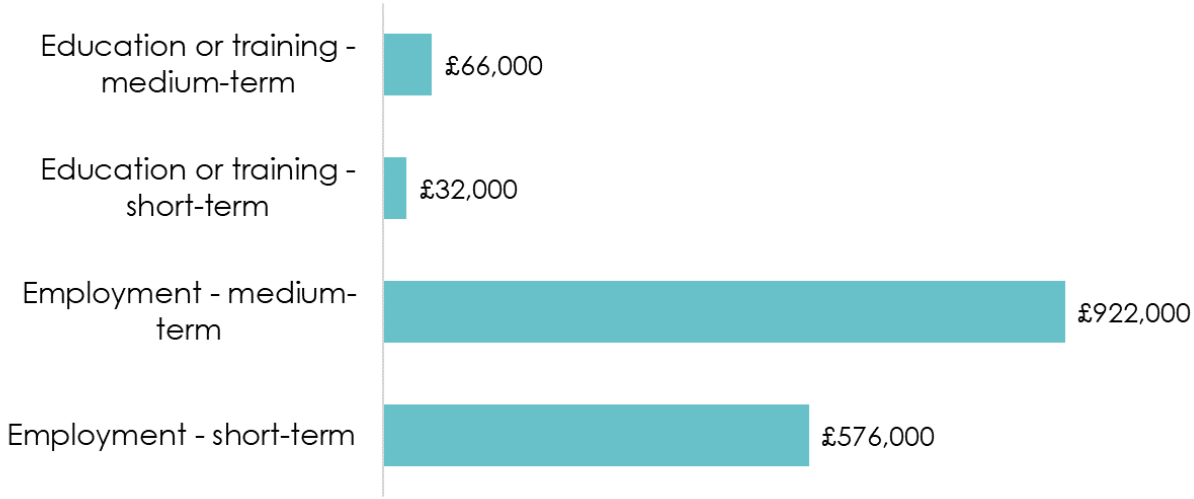
This section aims to respond RQ7 "What are the costs and benefits of the programme?".

The econometric models (see Section 3.4.1.5) estimate that DWF is associated with a further 21 young people entering employment and an additional six individuals entering education or training. The modelling of the economic benefits[19] shows that one move into employment for DWF participants is associated with benefits worth £72,792, and that one move into education or training is worth £16,450.[20]

Assuming that the results from the quantitative outcomes analysis show approximately the true impacts of the programme, the short-term and medium-term economic benefits relating to DWF are shown in Figure 15. There are small benefits associated with education and training worth approximately £98,000, but much larger economic benefits from employment. This is due to the greater impact on employment and the larger monetary benefits associated with one move into work. In total, DWF is associated with benefits worth £576,000 relating to employment in the year after exiting the programme, and a further £922,000 due to medium-term benefits of sustained employment.

[19] This analysis is based on a framework published by the Department for Work and Pensions (see Fujiwara (2010)), which has been used in recent analyses of programmes similar to Durham Works Futures (such as DWP (2016a), DWP (2016b) and Alma Economics (2022)).
[20] Economic benefit relates to the total monetary value of a number of potential benefits associated with an individual entering employment or education or training, such as increased output, better health outcomes and reduced crime. The total value of these benefits for one individual participating in DWF, subtracting any costs associated with entering employment or education or training, is £72,792 for employment and £16,450 for education or training. More detail on these benefits and the methodology used to calculate them is presented in Appendix E.

Figure 15: Aggregate economic benefits associated with DWF



Source: London Economics' analysis

Combining the estimates shown in Figure 15**Error! Reference source not found.** results in a total economic benefit associated with DWF of £1,596,000, equivalent to an economic benefit of £11,500 per participant (based on the central estimate). The costs of the DWF programme were £990,000 (£7,100 per participant). This results in a net benefit of the programme of £605,000 (Figure 16), equivalent to £4,400 per participant or a benefit-cost ratio of 1.6[21].

This would suggest that the programme is successful from value-for-money perspective as benefits outweigh the costs. The central estimate of 1.6 for DWF is similar to other employment programmes. For example, the central estimate tends to be lower than the benefit-cost ratios presented in an evaluation of Fair Start Scotland (a programme aimed to those with extreme labour market disadvantage in Scotland, with a central benefit-cost ratio to society of 3.6),[22] but greater than those presented for Group Work (a programme offering jobs search skills workshops to benefits claimants in England, with societal benefit-cost ratios between 0 and 0.67).[23]

[21] A benefit-cost ratio is the total economic benefits associated with a programme or intervention divided by the total cost. Any benefit-cost ratio greater than 1.0 means that the benefits of the programme are greater than the costs.

[22] Alma Economics (2022).

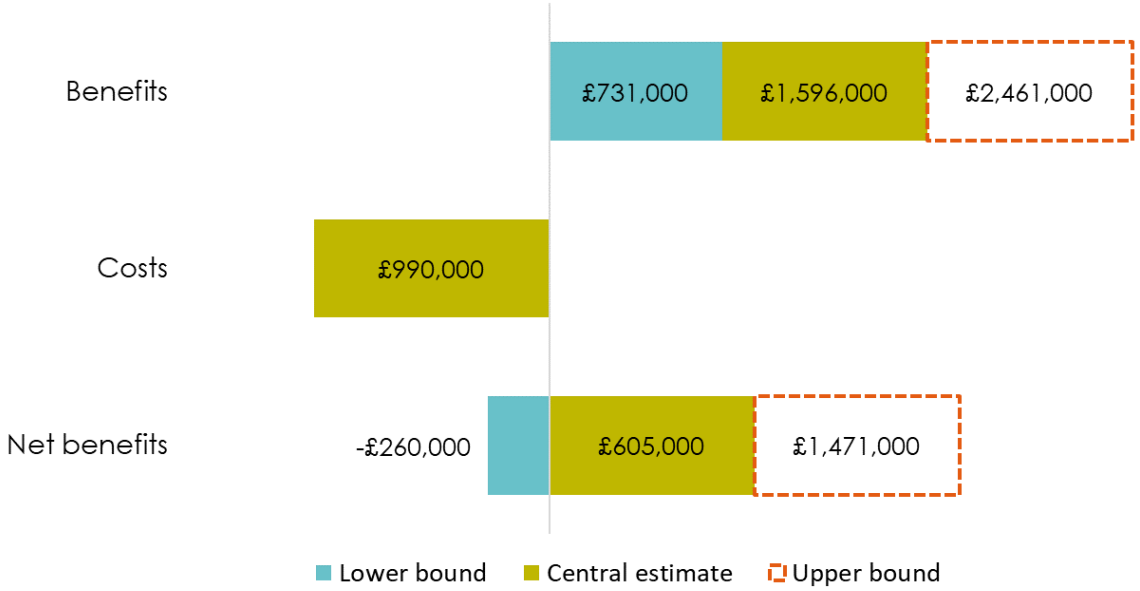
[23] ICF (2021).

Figure 16: Total benefits and costs associated with DWF (central estimate)

Source: London Economics' analysis

Lower bound estimates suggest that DWF resulted in an additional 11 individuals entering employment, but four fewer young people beginning education or training. Therefore, the lower bound estimate of the economic benefits of the programme are £731,000 (Figure 17), equivalent to £5,300 per participant. This is slightly lower than the costs of the programme, resulting in a net disbenefit of £260,000 (£1,900 per participant) and a benefit-cost ratio of 0.7.

Figure 17: Central estimate, upper bound and lower bound of benefits associated with DWF



Source: London Economics' analysis

Using the upper bound estimates generated from the econometric models results in an additional 30 people entering employment and a further 16 young people entering education or training. This results in a total economic benefit of £2,461,000 (equivalent to £17,700 per participant), corresponding to a net economic benefit of £1,471,000 (£10,600 per participant) and a benefit-cost ratio of 2.5.

3.5 Readiness for further evaluation

DWF could be a suitable programme for further evaluation. The programme theory is well-defined and programme delivery has adhered to it with high levels of fidelity. There are clear mechanisms of change that could be investigated, and it would be valuable to gain causal evidence around how a programme situated in a network of local authority provision supports vulnerable young people. Furthermore, there is some indication that DWF could recruit a sufficient sample for an experimental or quasi-experimental trial – between June and November 2022, a total of 332 young people were referred to the service.

However, as is reflected in the feasibility report produced for YFF, there are several barriers that mean DWF is not feasible for further evaluation at this time.

Firstly, and critically, DWF were not comfortable with randomly allocating treatment as part of a trial, therefore ruling out the possibility of a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT). Staff didn't think it was fair to arbitrarily allocate access to the programme and there were also concerns that the local authority's statutory responsibilities to potential participants could also rule this out. Even if a waitlist was applied or exclusion criteria that would allow the most vulnerable participants to access the service immediately were applied, an RCT approach was not deemed feasible. There were also issues with a control group receiving business-as-usual support as a number of components of DWF are being rolled out in DCC's statutory provision.

The possibility of a Quasi-Experimental Design (QED) was also explored with the DWF team. The main barriers relating to these approaches were costs and data availability. In the absence of random allocation, a counterfactual would have to be created by identifying a control group that couldn't work with DWF, for example from a neighbouring local authority. As DWF or other DCC council bodies would not have any contact with these individuals, recruiting them and gaining consent to use their data would be resource intensive. Securing outcome data from this group would also be difficult. Whilst DCC collect extensive and high-quality management information data as part of its business-as-usual approach, securing the appropriate consents and access to other LAs' data would be costly. These data sources may also be less reliable and would exclude important soft-outcomes data, such as

changes to self-efficacy, work-readiness, and confidence (which have all been highlighted in the pilot study). As such it would be difficult to conduct a worthwhile and robust study relying on these alone.

Alternative sources of outcomes data were considered that could be used to facilitate a quasi-experimental trial. The Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset was identified as bringing together key outcomes linked to DWF, such as EET status and access to benefits. Whilst this dataset wouldn't allow a trial to capture all the intended outcomes of DWF, using this data in a QED would overcome the barriers to data collection and still allow for analysis on the core outcomes of interest. However, access to this dataset has proved impossible in the short-medium term. As it is controlled by multiple government departments, it is exceedingly difficult to gain access at the individual level which is necessary for analysis of a specific programme like DWF. Whilst other datasets were considered, it was decided that completing a high quality, robust trial would be impossible without access to a reliable dataset such as LEO.

We also briefly discussed the possibility of using a regression discontinuity design (RDD). However, an RDD requires a continuous or quasi-continuous forcing variable that either sharply or gradually (in fuzzy RDD) alters participants' treatment allocation. This condition was not met for DWF as there was no such variable. Additionally, RDD designs are data intensive, and the sample reached by DWF would not be large enough to perform any robust analysis of this kind. .

As such, at this time we do not think DWF is viable for further evaluation, but it should be highlighted that this is due to constraints relating to robust evaluation approaches rather than because of any shortcomings in the programme itself.

4 Policy and practice insights

By combining learnings from the quantitative, qualitative, and economic strands of the pilot evaluation, we have produced several insights relating to policy and practice in the youth employment support space. These recommendations are presented tentatively, given the limitations of our research detailed in 5.2. Nonetheless, there are valuable lessons to be taken from the data we analysed. County Durham is an area with relatively high deprivation – the local authority is the 65th most deprived in England out of 317 and has pockets of extreme deprivation. As such, these insights might have particular relevance to employment support programmes in other similarly deprived areas.

It should be noted that the following recommendations are also informed by our evaluation work with another employment support programme that was completed concurrently, please see here for further details.

Tailored and personalised support was seen as effective among participants; this approach helped build trust between mentors and participants and maintained engagement, contributing to outcomes.

The person-centred, holistic approach that underpins DWF, achieved by pairing each young person with an EC, and often a peer mentor, who works with them to understand their individual circumstances, and provide a programme of personalised support, was welcomed among all types of participants. This one-to-one EC support was considered one of the most important and effective parts of the programme, by both participants and staff. To ensure this approach is successful, it is necessary to not only adjust the type of support offered to individual participants, but also the working style. DWF staff emphasised the importance of ensuring that the frequency and type of communication was tailored to participants' preferences, as this helped build trusted and healthy relationships between staff and participants and maintain engagement of young people. As such, in order to provide meaningful support to disadvantaged young people with complex barriers, the evidence we gathered suggests this person-centred ethos, which is facilitated by a delivery model that encourages flexibility according to participants' needs and smaller caseloads, could be implemented by other services in the sector.

Strategic partnerships with employers and local service providers can be crucial in providing opportunities for young people.

Evidence gathered across the project period also highlighted the significance to participants' journeys of tailored opportunities, such as intermediate labour market opportunities (ILMs), and access to networks and support that they would not otherwise be able to reach. Interviews with participants indicated that being given access to these opportunities was a crucial first step towards sustained employment. The ILMs in the DWF programme are clear examples of this mechanism; these protected and supported work placements were consistently highlighted as the most valuable aspect of DWF support. Participants particularly valued the supported nature of these placements and the variety of opportunities they provided. The success of the placements relied on the right placements being identified for the participants, highlighting the significance of knowledgeable staff and meaningful connections with local employers. A key learning point, therefore, is that services should prioritise building strategic relationships with employers and other local service providers (where resources allow) to provide these opportunities for excluded young people, in order to improve EET outcomes.

Reducing material barriers can increase engagement with EET support.

Travel issues are prominent in County Durham, which is a rural county. Evidence gathered from staff and service users highlighted the value in addressing physical or financial barriers. Relatively small amounts of financial support to overcome these barriers was seen as significant, with participants and staff reporting that ongoing engagement in support and willingness to take on employment opportunities was improved significantly when service users had the material support they needed. As such, evidence gathered here suggests that lowering physical barriers for disadvantaged groups is important to providing employment support.

DWF's strong relationships in the sector benefited the programme substantially, demonstrating the value in investing time and resources into relationship building.

The operational benefits of building strong relationships with referral agencies and other stakeholders in the sector was another learning that emerged from the study. DWF enjoy strong working relationships with local Jobcentres Plus, other DWP staff, local employers, and other council-run services. These links clearly improved the service that the DWF team were able to offer their participants. Information sharing with referral agencies was reported to lead to more successful engagement with young people, whilst their networks with other service providers allowed them to provide the varied, person-centred support that underpins the programme. Strong relationships provided opportunities whilst also smoothing the user-experience of participants – young people could be referred to other services or re-directed as necessary with little friction. As such, the value in investing time and resources into relationship building is emphasised by the delivery of DWF.

Adequate resourcing is necessary to build and provide effective and meaningful support to young people facing multiple disadvantages.

From a policy perspective, these insights place an emphasis on proper resourcing and funding for services that are targeted at young people facing multiple disadvantages. It does not appear to be easy to provide meaningful support for this cohort, so frontline staff need the time and space to build productive relationships with service users and external organisations. The flexibility that adequate resourcing offers staff is critical to providing services such as these.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Interpretation

Table 14 summarises the key findings of the evaluation under each research question. Following the table, we consider each question in more detail.

Table 14: Summary of findings

Research question	Findings
Research question 1: What is the association between increasing levels of engagement with DurhamWorks Futures and:	Overall, through the dosage-response models, we find associations between higher levels of dosage of the programme (as measured by impact-weighted hours of engagement, See Appendix D

Research question	Findings
• uptake of employment, education or training opportunities? • retention of employment opportunities? • labour market experience? • self-esteem? • resilience? • mental wellbeing? • work-related skills?	"Development of the dosage indicator") and outcomes. These associations were significant for the likelihood of being recorded as EET, and for improvements in wellbeing and self-esteem. In addition, compared to a comparator group drawn from Understanding Society, participation in DWF is associated with increased likelihood of transition into education, employment or training (EET). Data collection constraints meant the analysis was unable to capture whether employment opportunities were retained. It should also be noted that these estimates are correlational and do not imply a causal effect. Findings from qualitative interviews suggest that many DWF participants achieved positive outcomes. These include perceived improvements to confidence and self-esteem, social and interpersonal skills, as well as improvements in knowledge of the job market and job searching skills. The research also demonstrated that some participants achieve EET outcomes, but it is worth noting that some participants start their journey far away from the labour market, and that it is not realistic for all participants to achieve EET outcomes, for example, in some cases the focus should be on stabilising life circumstances.
Research question 2: What are the drivers of the associations (or absence of association) observed?	The qualitative interviews show that positive outcomes are especially driven by the personalised and holistic approach of the intervention, centred on the close and trusted mentor-mentee relationship. The interviews also suggested that DWF's work in increasing participants' confidence to engage in opportunities was a driver of positive outcomes. External barriers include a lack of motivation, family breakdown and bereavement, bad influences from peer groups, and poor mental health. Findings from the quantitative outcomes analysis show that previous educational attainment can be a driver of positive outcomes, as it is positively

Research question	Findings
	associated with transitions away from NEET status and transitions into employment.
Research question 3: To what extent was the programme delivered as intended, and in what ways did implementation vary?	The programme was delivered as intended, as it provided tailored, person-centred support that matched participants' needs and preferences. Both the focus of the sessions as well as the type of communication were tailored to each participant's needs. Although participant journeys can substantially vary, the phases described in the programme's participant journey maps were consistent with the delivery.
Research question 4: To what extent does the programme develop the skills and knowledge of employment coaches, local employers and/or service providers?	Findings from qualitative interviews suggest that staff have been able to access ongoing training opportunities to gain new skills and ways of working with vulnerable young people. Interviews with employers also suggest that recruiting young people from the programme has had some positive effects on employers. However, given the small sample of employer interviews, findings should be treated with caution.
Research question 5: How does the programme develop strategic relationships with programme partners and service providers, and how does this affect young people's support journeys?	DWF adopts a proactive role in building relationships with employers to generate opportunities for their participants, such as Intermediate Labour Market or grant-funded employment opportunities. Open communication and ongoing dialogue are at the centre of their approach. A key enabler for building relationships was appointing an Employment Engagement Officer who works alongside the ECs. The external relationships with employers have a significant effect on programme participants, as they often contribute to their employment journeys starting, and progress towards suitable employment.
Research question 6: To what extent does the programme adopt a No Wrong Doors approach, and how does this affect young people's support journey?	DWF offers access to a range of services to support participants with different types and levels of need, which is in line with the No Wrong Doors approach. While the No Wrong Doors approach is not an explicit ethos of the programme, it is embedded and

Research question	Findings
	reflected by staff's willingness and ability to refer their participants to a range of external services and opportunities that meet a variety of different needs and help reduce barriers to employment.
Research question 7: What are the costs and benefits of the programme?	Whilst it is important to note that the results from the quantitative outcomes analysis are purely correlational and do not imply a causal effect, the programme was found to have positive associations on the probability of transitioning away from NEET status and on finding employment. Assuming that these results reflect the actual impacts of the programme, there are positive net benefits associated with DWF. That is the benefits were greater than the costs of each programme. The total net benefits were worth approximately £600,000, equivalent to a net benefit per participant of £4,400. These figures correspond to a positive benefit-cost ratio of 1.6.

Below, we consider each research question in more detail.

Research question 1: What is the association between increasing levels of engagement with DWF and uptake of employment, education or training opportunities; retention of employment opportunities; labour market experience; self-esteem; resilience; mental wellbeing and work-related skills?

- We find evidence of associations between higher dosage of the programme and most of the outcomes studied, where dosage reflects the level of engagement of the participant with the programme An increase of one impact-weighted hour of engagement was associated with an increase of around 0.1 percentage points' likelihood of being recorded as EET. The higher engagement was also associated with higher levels of wellbeing and self-esteem.
- Consistent with this, the programme was found to be positively associated with the probability of transitioning away from NEET status and on finding employment, compared to a comparator group drawn from

Understanding Society. The estimated association between participation in the programme and employment outcomes was 14.8 percentage points for DWF.

- However, it is important to note that these analyses are purely correlational, and cannot provide evidence for any causal relationship between the programme and employment and education outcomes.
- Findings from qualitative interviews suggest that many DWF participants felt they have achieved positive outcomes because of engaging with the programme. One of the most prominent perceived outcomes among participants was an improvement in confidence and self-esteem, in particular building young people's social and interpersonal skills. Another prominent perceived outcome was improvements in participants' knowledge about the job market, and in their skills and confidence in writing CVs, applying for jobs and attending job interviews. This was achieved through support from their EC and training sessions. Finally, the qualitative research also pointed to many harder outcomes among participants, such as uptake of EET opportunities.
- However, the findings also suggest that it is important to acknowledge that some programme participants start their journey far away from the labour market, and for them the focus should be on reaching the smaller, intermediary outcomes (such as stabilising their life circumstances, or improving their confidence), rather than aiming to achieve EET outcomes.

Research question 2: What are the drivers of the associations (or absence of association) observed?

- The qualitative interviews show that positive outcomes are especially driven by the personalised and holistic approach adopted by the programme, and that the close and trusted EC-participant relationship is at the heart of this. This means that the activities offered to young people are often well-received and impactful, leading to a range of impacts on confidence, resilience, and uptake of EET opportunities. Given the vulnerable position of participants, there are a range of external barriers that can hinder the effectiveness of the programme, including lack of motivation, family breakdown and bereavement, bad influences from peer groups, and poor mental health.

- Findings from the quantitative outcomes analysis show that previous educational attainment can also be a driver of positive outcomes, as further qualifications were positively associated with transitions away from NEET status and transitions into employment. For example, those with an undergraduate or postgraduate degree qualification were 42.5 percentage points more likely to transition away from NEET status compared to those with entry level or pre-GCSE qualifications. However, this analysis can only provide evidence of correlational relationships between the outcome variables and previous educational attainment and cannot assert a causal relationship.

Research question 3: To what extent was the programme delivered as intended, and in what ways did implementation vary?

- DWF was delivered as intended. As anticipated in the programme theory, and confirmed by the research, the programme provided holistic, person-centred support. The support was tailored to each participant, and therefore, participants' journeys throughout the programme often differed, as intended. As outlined in the ToC, DWF offered and delivered a range of activities to young people besides the core one-to-one support with employment coaches.
- When needed, DWF participants were able to receive advocacy support to stabilise their personal circumstances – such as their housing or financial situation – as well as employment support to explore employment opportunities and develop employment skills. Those who were ready to enter the labour market and secured a job also received follow-up in-work support.

Research question 4: To what extent does the programme develop the skills and knowledge of employment coaches, local employers and/or service providers.

- Findings from qualitative interviews with staff from DWF suggest that, as outlined in the programme's ToC, they received ongoing training opportunities to gain new skills and learn appropriate ways of working with vulnerable young people. At DWF, training topics included Durham County Council values and expected behaviours, as well as training in Information, Advice or Guidance. Despite this, training opportunities were

not widely discussed with DWF staff, as interviews rather focused on exploring young people's journeys throughout the programme.

- Interviews with employers from DWF also suggest that recruiting young people from the programme has had some positive effects on employer organisations. For instance, a DWF employer reported becoming more mindful of the frequency and type of support a young person might need, based on their preferred ways of working and needs. These findings, however, should be treated with caution given the small sample of employer interviews.

Research question 5: How does the programme develop strategic relationships with programme partners and service providers, and how does this affect young people's support journeys?

- DWF is heavily focused on creating employment opportunities for participants. Generating these opportunities relied heavily on a network of employment partners, as well as partners who provided other services. ECs took a proactive role in building and maintaining these relationships to generate opportunities for young people, and were supported by the programme's Employment Engagement Officer. In terms of relationships with referral partners, DWF staff took advantage of their position within Durham County Council to build networks that generate referrals, and also invested time in building relationships with non-Council service providers to boost referrals.
- External relationships have a significant effect on DWF's participants as they often contribute to their journeys starting. At the same time, relationships with employers were crucial in providing meaningful and suitable opportunities for participants. Because of the complex barriers faced by many DWF participants, finding the right opportunity for each individual is central to success.

Research question 6: To what extent does the programme adopt a No Wrong Doors approach, and how does this affect young people's support journey?

- Whilst it is not an explicit feature of the DWF's programme theory, a No Wrong Doors approach appears to be an underlying principle of the programme's support model. The approach was most visible in DWF staff's willingness and ability to refer their clients to a range of external services

and opportunities, such as counselling, academic tutoring or skills trainings, that met a variety of different needs and helped reduce barriers to employment. The No Wrong Doors Approach was applied with a particular focus on moving young people towards employment, and young people facing significant complex barriers were referred to other services that may be better placed to support them.

Research question 7: What are the costs and benefits of the programme?

- Combing the correlational findings from the quantitative outcomes analysis with estimates of the economic benefits associated with entering employment and education or training, the benefits associated with additional young people entering employment or education were found to be greater than the costs of each programme. The economic benefit associated with the programme is £1,596,000, equivalent to £11,500 per participant. The costs of the programme were £990,000, equivalent to a cost per programme participant of £7,100, which results in a net benefit of the programme of £605,000 (£4,400 per participant). These net benefits resulted in a benefit-cost ratio of 1.6[24].

5.2 Limitations

This section highlights the limitations of this pilot study, particularly regarding the quality of the data, and the quantitative findings.

The main limitation of our analysis is that we are unable to make causal claims about the impact of DWF. In order to assess the potential impacts of the programme, we used a combination of analysis of the association between dosage and outcomes, combined with qualitative research. While this provides suggestive evidence, this doesn't reflect the causal effect of the programme and the results should therefore be treated cautiously.

The results lack causality due to Omitted Variable Bias. This refers to the presence to confounders that might exaggerate or attenuate the estimated

[24] A benefit-cost ratio is the total economic benefits associated with a programme or intervention divided by the total cost. Any benefit-cost ratio greater than 1.0 means that the benefits of the programme are greater than the costs. This would suggest that the programme is a success from an economic evaluation perspective; it constitutes value-for-money as the benefits outweigh the costs.

effect of the programme. As a pilot analysis, this study was not designed to control for this bias, but rather to provide evidence of promise. Omitted Variable bias affected the analysis in the following ways:

- The dosage-response models do not control for confounders. The dosage-response models are based on participants' engagement with the programme and can give some sense of whether the relationship between high engagement with the programme and the outcomes is in the expected direction. While we included in the analysis some features to mitigate the bias (such as fixed effects), it is impossible to completely rule out confounders.
- The comparison group from the Understanding Society Survey used in the Economic analysis differs from the treatment group in several dimensions. This is because Understanding Society is based in the overall population, while DWF focuses on young people with extreme labour market disadvantage. Although the comparison group was constructed as similar as possible to the treatment, including controls for participants' characteristics, it is likely that the analysis omits some relevant variables for which data is not available.

There are also data limitations in the analysis. Available data presented issues such as missingness, inconsistency of recorded activities, and sample attrition. Attrition, particularly, was a key parameter assessed to evaluate the readiness for trial of the pilot. While this limited the information we could analyse, this also means that further studies should include several mechanisms and incentives to engage young people in data collection, or rely more substantially in administrative datasets and national surveys.

There are also a number of limitations related to the findings from the qualitative research. Firstly, we used a purposive sampling approach to recruit and sample participants for interviews. Steps were taken to ensure a diversity of participants, including in terms of gender, ethnicity, qualifications, age, disability, and employment history. However, they are a relatively small proportion of all participants. The qualitative findings therefore may not necessarily reflect the views of the wider population; rather its strength is to provide rich insights into the range and diversity of views. At the same time, self-selection bias (only those participants who wanted to take part in the

interviews did so) could mean that those participants less satisfied with the programme did not want to take part in the research.

Secondly, qualitative research relies on self-report, which is affected both by the fact that participants may not themselves be able to accurately identify the causal relationships between the activities they undertook and the outcomes they achieved, or may misreport or exaggerate the impact out of gratitude to the people providing the support. Although qualitative data provides a rich and useful understanding of how participants viewed and experienced the programme, and can support the making of causal claims, caution should be exercised in making causal claims based on qualitative data specifically.

5.3 Future research and publications

5.3.1 Feasibility for a full-scale impact trial

As part of the evaluation, the research team has produced three internal reports to the YFF about the feasibility of progressing the programme to full-scale impact trials (McGannon et al, 2023a; McGannon et al, 2023b; Summers et al., 2023). The feasibility reports propose and discuss in detail several options for potential RCTs and QEDs, depending on the availability of management information data, as well as willingness and ability of programme to randomise and recruit enough participants.

For various reasons, the YFF has decided not to take forward any of these options, but the learnings from these feasibility reports could be applied to evaluating other similar youth employment programmes in the future. The options discussed in the reports are: a) conducting a randomised controlled trial, randomising at the individual level; b) conducting a matched difference in differences (DiD) using participants' data in the LEO dataset to measure outcomes relating to employment, education and access to benefits; c) if not possible to access LEO, conducting a survey-based matched comparator QED, recruiting comparator participants from DWP, Jobcentre Plus and/or other Youth Hubs.

5.3.2 Feasibility for a comparison study

As discussed in Chapter 4, this evaluation was initially part of a larger evaluation intended to compare the effectiveness of a hub-and-spoke model (in which support was supplied through a case management and

partnership approach) and an integrated hub model (in which delivery was focused on a youth hub and service delivery was centralised). The comparison study would involve the DWF intervention described in this report, as well as another youth employment support programme called Liverpool Talent Match (LTM) described in a companion report (Lawton-Summers et al., 2024). However, a comparison study was not possible in practice. First, our research showed that the two interventions did not neatly fit into those models that were envisaged from the start. Participants accessed the services in similar ways, through multiple access points in the regions they operated, and participants frequently referred to internal and external service providers in both programmes. Secondly, the two interventions were too different across other factors, in particular there were key differences in the target group (LTM worked with more disadvantaged groups than DWF) and the focus of delivery (LTM is considerably more focused on stabilising personal circumstances than DWF). As such, in Chapter 4 we only discussed common lessons on the effectiveness of youth employment support programmes, rather than providing an in-depth comparative analysis on the effectiveness of two different models.

If YFF or others are still interested in such a comparative study in the future, we see two potential options to do this effectively. The first option is to still use existing programmes, but this will require a more thorough assessment process to identify appropriate interventions that are suitably similar across all characteristics, but different on the model of delivery. This may require commissioning a research team to conduct a detailed scoping project, including discussing the potential evaluation with providers of youth employment support programmes across the country, and then assess any potential pairs that could be used for a comparative study. The second option is to commission two programmes from scratch to provide consistency across, except on the one distinguishing factor. This would likely have much higher start-up costs, but ensure a very strong evaluation design, especially if the evaluator was brought in early in the process.

Appendices

Appendices are provided in a separate document.